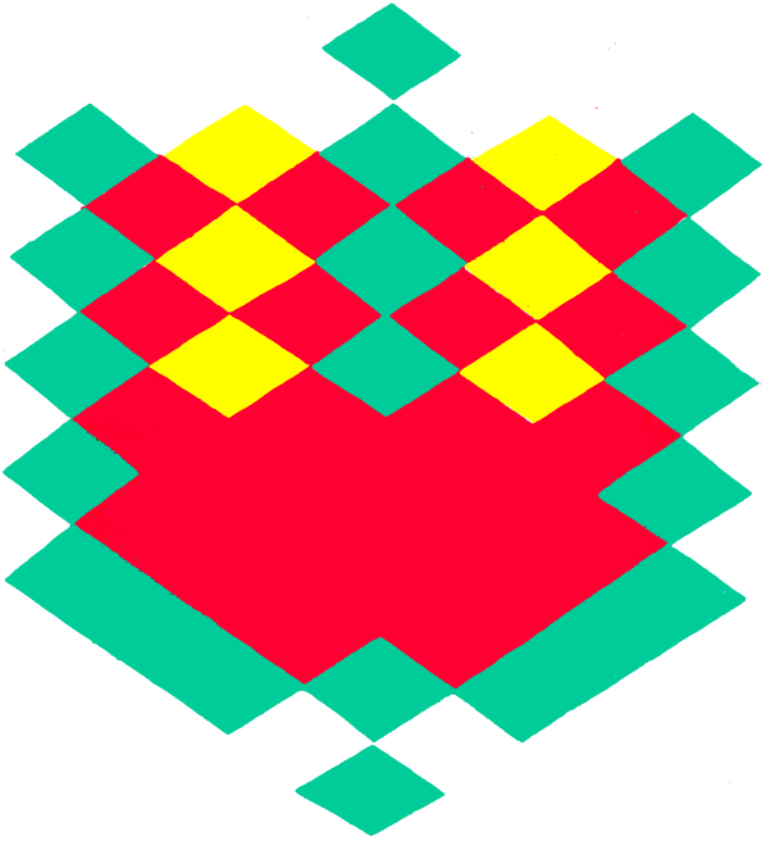
DO YOU KNOW HOW THE SUN LAUGHS?

Modern Moldavian Short Stories



The Progress Publishers have already put out

The Progress Publishers have already put out in English translation a number of collections acquainting readers with the short-story style of individual Soviet republics: **Stories of the Soviet Ukraine, Dialogue at Sea** (Stories by Baltic Writers), and **We of the Mountains** (Armenian Stories).

The present collection is Moldavian. It consists of works by writers who make the short story their main form. The best known and most typical story of each has been selected, while the collection as a whole will give an idea of the creative manner, stylistic trends, themes and the psychological environment of the characters they create. Stories pulsating with the life of modern Moldavia and tales about its past are both presented in the frame of profound social and ethical problems.

The foreword, "The Moldavian Short Story Today", is contributed by Mikhai Chimpoi, a well-known Moldavian critic. At the end of the book the reader will find brief biographical notes about the authors.

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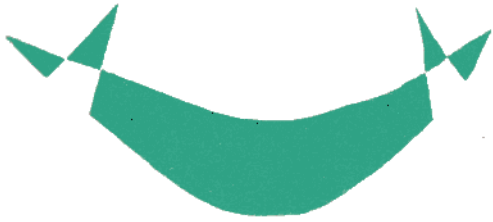

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Рассказы современных
молдавских писателей

На английском языке

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*The Moldavian Short Story Today**

For a Moldavian peasant the winter has always been that slack between-season period when he could take life easily and enjoy himself; among his enjoyments a prominent place belonged to story-telling. And if the popular British story-teller Muriel Spark gave one of her stories a title taken from Shakespeare: "A Sad Tale's Best for Winter", Moldavians would say, on the contrary, that winter is just the time for the brightest, most lively, most cheerful stories.

Even if our readers are not acquainted with the modern Moldavian short story, many will at least know the name of Ion Kryange, a writer of the last century. His tales, found in many English textbooks, illustrate a basic trait of the Moldavian character: Moldavians are born raconteurs.

The open good-heartedness of Selwyn Macgregor, the Burgundian gaiety of Colas Breugnon have always been part of the Moldavian character; they flung defiance at the blows of fate and the hardships of life, creating their own secret, unified, unstained world.

Moldavian short-story writers have inherited the raconteur's gift, a gift of especial value in its testimony to humanity, to a healthy simplicity, frankness and innate nobility.

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At the same time it must be noted that the Moldavian short story of today is caught up in the current of general development in this genre.

Critics have recently had much to say about the future both of the genre and of the story-teller himself. He is hemmed in on the one side by the great power of the actual document, and on the other by the invasion of the short story by bordering spheres of literature: publicism, philosophy, reportage, cinema arrangements and so on. The born story-teller is vanishing, or to be more exact, is doomed to vanish, and the story itself is transformed into an essay with highly stressed rational elements.

It is true, the aesthetic prestige of the genre itself is now falling. The short story answers ideally to the conspective spirit of modern life with its things left unsaid, its nervous decisiveness, its mobility. The mobility of the stories is underscored by the well-known Japanese prose writer Kobo Abe; it is like a cyclist moving steadily forward, with constant glances backward through his mirror. This "mirror reflection" in the modern story symbolises not only increased concentration but active retrospection; the mirror ceases to be static, it becomes retrovisual, a mirror of hindsight.

The Moldavian story-teller, too, and especially in recent years, has become interested in looking into the retrovisual mirror, trying to show each living fact through the personal logic of his character, to alter the perspective of time, to alternate events dynamically, to split them into a multitude of asides and thus create an extremely full, complex impression. The development of the Moldavian short story has followed the line of intensified attention to psychology, to a character's inner world.

I would say that at present we have no great epic novelists, architects of great prose (many of the present novels by Ion

Drutse, Ion Chobanu, Vasile Vasilake, Anna Lupan and Ariadna Shalar are in the style of series of short stories), or such masters of plot as Gilbert Chesterton or Agatha Christie, but there are word-painters who depict life with truth and inspiration and who of all colours prefer green, symbolising life.

In a short story, cognition of life is narrowed down, as it were, but it is active and profound. The Moldavian short story of today is frequently able to carry out a paradoxical purpose: to depict the dynamism of the everyday flow of life and catch the nervous floating spirit of our age in quiet, balanced forms.

In this collection the most interesting and typical examples of the Moldavian short story of today are collected. Taking as examples the work of several writers, we see what the short story discloses, what means are used, what spheres of social life are involved, what interests the writers in the relations between circumstances and characters, between the thoughts and actions of the people described, how they compare the appearance and essence of things, how they draw the forms of life—in short, how they cope with their main purpose—to show, in short story genre, the spirit of the time and the psychology of our contemporary.

Ion Drutse, for instance, underlines not so much the abrupt changes from one mood to another as the striking individuality and uniqueness of each emotion.

The concept of time in Ion Drutse's stories is closely linked with the value and uniqueness of every moment lived. The lyrical-philosophical essay has in general become part of our prose. Pondering over what is taking place, over the calling of man on earth, over the art of living, creates a certain narrative super-structure. But with all the gentleness of the narrative tone and the quiet interweaving of events, the

reader feels a latent dynamism of character, a quality which accompanies people in their hard struggle against the turns of fate. The characters in Ion Drutse's stories, peasants embodying the highest ideal of a human being, are spiritually indivisible from what surrounds them, forming an organic whole.

In contrast to Ion Drutse, George Menyuk shows the dialectical movement of time through contrasting emotional states and reactions, through counterposing heterogeneous moments in life. Three main themes run through his stories: the memory of the past war which left a deep imprint on the thoughts and emotions of our contemporaries, the joy of living, and the creative calling of each and every individual. It is through creative activity that Menyuk's characters—workers, collective farmers and artists—come to a profound understanding of the flow of life. Lion, son of a village joiner ("Kaloyan") already as a boy started modelling, trying to make animals and also people. Later on he discovers great significance in his work, his figures help people to see themselves and their times more clearly.

Nearly all Menyuk's characters have a passion for creation, a super-sensitivity, capable of experiencing a whole complex of emotions simultaneously. It is not hard to observe that the expression of their thoughts about art, about life, possesses a literary turn adopted from the author. Such a unity of views would alert the reader did it not possess such clear artistic intention: to create and maintain a tension of thought, an emotional content of seeking, addressed to days lived through, to work completed and to that which lies in store.

Vasile Vasilake's *Mourning on the Outskirts* with great artistic subtlety offers a chain of hypotheses and riddles round the death of Cruchanu, a man who in his lifetime had

shown no outstanding traits. Vasile Vasilake constructs a number of versions in order to shed the light of truth upon him. All the characters taking part in the discussion deepen the basic plan of narration by a detailed analysis of Cruchanu's acts.

The feature of the story is not the amusing series of ideas which arise after Cruchanu's death, but the form in which his spiritual portrait is painted. The thought is hammered home that even such "ordinary" people as Cruchanu have their complexities, that time can call up inexplicable reactions within him that make him act in ways which at first glance appear to be quite contradictory: to go against the chairman, to beat up his neighbour, to avoid people or to fall in love with Ox-Eyes.

It may be said that the modern Moldavian short story confirms the complexity of man's inner world. This is frequently seen in the strange, in fact extraordinary actions and gestures of characters created by Vasile Vasilake, Vlad Iovitse, Ariadna Shalar, Vladimir Beshlyage, and Serafim Saka. It can be seen in the careful psychological motivation of social characters in stories by Emilian Bukov, Ion Chobanu, Samson Shlyakhu and Anna Lupan.

From 1918 to 1940 is a long time; the part of Moldavia on the right bank of the Dhiester, Bessarabia, was torn away by the bourgeois-landlord government of the Rumania of that time. Led by underground Communist organisations, the working people of Bessarabia struggled for union with Soviet Moldavia. And in August 1940 Bessarabia joined with the part of Moldavia on the left bank of the river to form the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic. The revolutionary movement in Bessarabia, the Soviet people's war against the nazi invaders and the subsequent changes in the young Soviet republic became the theme of many of the older

Moldavian writers. Concrete observations of life, attested facts form the basis of their stories.

Destiny is the moral and spiritual confrontation of the personality and the collective, man and his times. An eloquent example is the story "Hammer and Stone, Sing to Me" by Serafim Saka, a young writer, where the life of the stone-cutter Toma develops on the background of the new age, the age of bulldozers and excavators. This writer in general prefers characters with a firm concept of life, a definite "professional" psychology, whether it be that of a former kolkhoz chairman, a peasant or an architect.

If one feels in many of the writers of whom we have spoken a desire to make the characters they create their sword-bearers, so to speak, Andrei Strymbanu shows a more abstract view of the world about him. Even his titles are frequently symbolic: "White Soot", for example. He catches the psychology of man renewed, and certain complexities of that renewal process.

Many Moldavian writers are attracted by the theme of childhood as a metaphorical form for the discovery of life. In addition to Nicolae Esinenku, who has done some interesting work in the miniature genre, Vlad Iovitse, Yacob Burghiu and various other writers use this theme.

Naturally, our division of Moldavian short-story writers according to style and subject matter is only conventional. In this brief article we could give only the most general and cursory idea of the Moldavian short story at the present time.

The reader of the stories in this collection will get a glimpse of life in Soviet Moldavia, and an idea of the ethical and psychological world of its people.

Mikhai Chimpoi

Kishinev, 1974

The Moldavian Modern Short Stories

VLADIMIR BESHLYAGE

*A Tale of Whiskers**

If only I'd known what was going to happen to me, I'd have got rid of those whiskers in good time. Once when my old woman was a girl and I was a lad, I tickled her with my mustache, and from then on she's clung to me so close, I've never managed to pluck her off to this day.

You know me: you can't pull a word out of me with pliers. But if I see there's a lot of nonsense being talked at a meeting, I just give a tug to my mustache, jump up and bring out all that's been seething inside me. And it's all the same even if I know the bosses and all sorts of tricksters and particularly I myself are going to come off badly afterwards.

Yes, a lot has happened to me in my life, but anything like what led to those split pants — never! And where's the blame? With those same whiskers, and to hell with them!

All right. Well, so my time came to retire, to go on pension. My old woman was glad, but I kept thinking: Eh dear, how the years fly past! Like a foaming stallion! Seems but the day before yesterday I was walking about town with a fat mailbag on my hip, and now there's none knows me. Only yesterday I drove Ryzhukha, bringing lime from the station, and now she's likely dead long ago, poor thing.

All right. Well, so we sat and waited. A month, and they didn't bring my pension. Two months and still no pension. My old woman glared at me. "Where's your pension?" So I

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went to the pension office. And what do you think? I found that I still lacked three months, two weeks and a day before my pension time.

All right. All right, eh? Nothing was all right. Of course everyone knows mistakes happen, but why did it have to happen just to me? I never shirked work. I could work another ten months. But where — that was the question. I couldn't go back to being a watchman because they'd taken on Neighbour Foma in my place. A postman? But who'd give me back the legs I had when I was young? To the district consumer centre, then? But Ryzhukha was long dead, and I had no other friends there.

Then St. Kirica sent me Tikhon Ivanych.

"With whiskers like yours, your place is with us," and he embraced me. "Your hand on it, brother!"

So I went as cloakroom attendant to Tikhon Ivanych. To the restaurant.

All right. What's a cloakroom attendant? Listen and I'll tell you what he is. A man comes in, you take his coat or raincoat and hang it on a hook. When he leaves you give back whatever you took from him. Some people you have to teach that they must take off their coats because no one taught them that at home, others you help to find the outer doors if you see they're looking in the wrong place.

In the beginning I liked my work. And the director seemed to be a very decent sort. The first day Tikhon Ivanych three times clapped me on the shoulder, twice addressed me by name and patronymic and once nearly treated me to a glass of vodka.

Earlier on customers had come thinly in ones and twos, but after I began working at the restaurant they crowded in. The horseshoe fastened by the door had never brought so much custom as my whiskers had.

So on the first day, Tikhon Ivanych and I were dear friends. The next day I didn't see him, but his name was mentioned three times in my presence. The first time was in the morning, when a chair stuck to a customer's trousers and he had to go home without them. The second time was at midday when another customer absent-mindedly swallowed three teeth with his cutlet and started bawling, "What can I shay to my shweetheart now?" The third time was in the evening when some hooligan started throwing plates through the window because instead of beer they'd given him some sort of yellow muck and on top of that, wouldn't let him lie down to sleep under the table.

Now I ask you, is that the way to treat a working man?

As soon as Tikhon Ivanych came I went to him and told him about all the incidents. Told him everything, as a friend and brother. He looked at me as though he'd suddenly noticed a flea on my nose, then told me to shut the door behind me.

On the third day he walked past me without a flicker of an eye, although he saw me all right. And afterwards, the same. Just as though it wasn't me but a sack of straw standing there.

Look at that, now, how proud he'd got! Just as if I hadn't known him when he used to run about with holes in his jacket and boots.

My old woman told me, "Don't quarrel with your boss. Work your month out and then —" What, I said, does he think I'm working for him? Not for him, for the restaurant. There's me having to blush for everything while he — as soon as there's any noise, he's off! Just open the door of his private office a crack and look at the food that's put before him on the table. Kings don't eat like that. But what do they give a working man? How do they treat his stomach? Eh?

My old woman says, "Let him alone for the love of God." No, I tell her, I won't let him alone, not if I have to pull these very whiskers out by the roots.

At the very first meeting (I remember like it was yesterday, Tikhon Ivanych was on the platform, sitting all sprawled out) I got myself up and without thinking twice came out with all I had in my mind. In front of the whole staff! (That's what I'm like, I never leave for tomorrow what I can do today. A man's memory can be tricky.)

Tikhon Ivanych first went green-white, then beet-red and shouted that I'd been talking three minutes instead of two and not about the right thing, and that was, that in summer time the flies fell right into the soup! What could I say? Ask them. Someone started to laugh but choked it off. The others didn't even try.

I've said already that on the first day Tikhon Ivanych and I were like brothers, but from the third he stopped even greeting me. Well, after that meeting the director would give a bow when he saw me in the distance.

One day as he came into the vestibule he banged his forehead against the door-post, but instead of rubbing the place held out his hand to me.

"Well, how's things? All right, eh? You like it here, eh?" He threw me a wink. "And the way you criticised me that time! Ha-ha-ha!" He clapped a friendly hand on my shoulder. "You know what? Call me by my first name. No need of 'Tikhon Ivanych, Comrade Director'.... We're democratic here. Just say whatever you want. Plain and simple, with my first name — when there's no one else here, that is. After all, we're old friends, aren't we?" Another clap on my shoulder. "Well, that's settled, then." Off he went.

It's a true saying, you don't notice the threshold until you hit the lintel. If it hadn't been for me, who would have pulled

up the director? All the rest — the cooks and waiters — they didn't dare let out a squeak.

But my old woman still kept harping on the same thing: "When the boss shakes your hand, you can be sure your hen's going to die, or your wages'll be cut, or you'll get such a boil you can't sit down for three weeks." Later that night she nudged me awake with her elbow and said she'd dreamed I was a calf capering about the yard, and no red fur on my neck which was a bad sign. I wanted to drive my elbow into the silly woman's side, hard, but I remembered poor Ryzhukha and forgave her.

Eh, if I'd only known what was coming.

M'yes. Well, one day Tikhon Ivanych had a party with some of his pals — I remember two window-panes were broken in his office. When they all came out he stopped in front of me.

"Look at this, boys! Well? You see what I've got for the cloakroom? The whiskers — real spikes!" And he pulled my whiskers until I almost howled. "You won't find the like in all Moldavia!" Then he jammed my nose with his thumb. "Only r-r-remember: long whiskers but a short tongue. Otherwise — snip! Off they come and your head with them."

I wanted to shout after him, "Pull your father's like that" and perhaps a word or two about his mother, but a lump rose up and stuck in my throat and something salty flowed into my mouth.

My old woman was still singing the same song: "Don't argue. What d'you expect when a man's drunk?" "H'm," I say, "when the drink's in, it's truth comes out. It wasn't me he wanted, only my whiskers! And to pull them in broad daylight, in front of other people! All right, but what's a tongue got to do with it?"

"Better keep quiet," said my old woman. "Work your month and then —" No, I said, I won't keep quiet! If he's director and I'm cloakroom attendant, does that mean he can make a meal of me, like the cook Gitse? No, I'll toss him into the cauldron first! I can settle his hash too, if it comes to that! I'll put in a complaint. And if that doesn't help, I'll write to the papers. They know me at all the newspaper offices. With all those years I was postman!

Before three days had passed Gitse came running. "Go quick, the director wants you! And he's in a real rage about something!" I started — aha, he's found out about the complaint!

I went in and there he was, nothing special about him, just sitting at his desk with a dozen dishes in front of him. He would take something from a plate, sniff it with one nostril, then the other, then suck at a cigarette. (He was testing the menu.)

When he saw me he jumped up and wanted to seat me beside him on the settee but began to sneeze, and I stayed by the door.

"God bl —"

He looked at me as though he'd seen a lame flea on my nose.

"What sort of cloakroom attendant are you? Eh? In Kishinev they're all in uniform. And you? What if an inspection commission came? Here," he pulled a peaked cap out of a drawer in his table and was just raising it when — what do you think? — the cap jumped out of his hand, flew over to me and settled right on my head. "Ha-ha-ha!" Tikhon Ivanych laughed. "A fine cap!"

As for me, a uniform, a sack or the devil's hide, it's all the same. My old woman had to put her word in again. "If they all wear one in Kishinev, why shouldn't you?" Yes, I told her,

but others have whole suits, while all I've got is this pan with a peak.

To be quite honest, I don't even know what that cap looked like, dark blue or black, round or square, big or small — I never took a proper look. But it clung to my head so that in the evening when I wanted to go to bed, I pulled at it and my old woman pulled and together we could hardly get it off. Then towards the end of the night I felt in my sleep something scraping against my head. It scraped and creaked like an unoiled door. The next morning I felt my head; it was there all right but the cap, devil take it, was firmly fixed. What could have happened? I clearly remembered hanging it on the hook in the evening.

I arrived at work and settled down in the cloakroom. My head was humming and crackling. I felt it getting longer and shorter, rounding and widening. Suddenly something hissed at the back of it, like steam coming out. It suddenly felt quite light, so that I even doubted whether there was anything on my shoulders or not.

A neighbour's boy came in, looked at me and called out, "Why've you got a box on your head?" I looked into the mirror and stood, frozen: my head was square. Yes, not long, or wide, or round but square. Like a box.

You'll be wondering why I mentioned trousers at the beginning. You'll understand in a moment.

I wanted to swear at Tikhon Ivanych in my choicest words, but my last human thought suddenly evaporated. After that there was only emptiness under the peak.

Suddenly there was a ringing in my left ear. My cap raised me and carried me out to the street. Tikhon Ivanych was nearing the restaurant. I ran to meet him, my cheeks pouched of themselves and I began blowing the dust from the pavement before him. I opened the door for him. Tikhon

Ivanych clapped me on the back, smiling, "Good man!" I wanted to kiss his hand, but managed only to touch his sleeve with my lips. It had a lovely smell of pickled herring.

The cook and waiters bowed low before him, quivering with fear. Tikhon Ivanych snapped his fingers on the forehead of each and made for his private office. Watching him go, I noticed that Comrade Director too had a square head. I was astonished and even alarmed: how had I dared to live up to now with a round head on my shoulders? Suddenly I felt as happy as though my old woman had flown straight to heaven on an airplane and they had at last brought my pension for ten months all at once.

M'yes. Well, so there I was sitting by the cloakroom. A diner came in, then another, then several all at once. Get up? Let them look after themselves! If I go to meet each of them who'll hear when the ringing starts in my ears again? Ryzhukha?

So I went and fixed thirty-nine springs on the door. As soon as anyone came in it gave him such a push forward that he shot like a rocket into the farthest corner of the restaurant, in his outer things. When he left, the door again gave him a push from behind that shot him across to the other side of the street. One, I remember, lost his heel in the door, and another kept coming three days for nothing, he just couldn't find his nose in the pile of rubbish. Serve him right. Let him learn how to treat technical innovations.

One evening before we dropped asleep my old woman asked me, "What's happened to you? Your head knocks like an empty barrel." And it was quite true, for some days there had been a knocking in my head. Tap! Tap! What could it be?

I came to work, went to the mirror, looked at myself and suddenly saw — what do you think? Three wooden spoons sticking out of my forehead.

My old woman said, "It's a good omen, one spoon means wisdom, a second happiness, a third a long life and riches." H'm, but what if it hadn't been spoons, but a ladle? I think these were my thoughts. Yes, it's real happiness to have a square head and only three thoughts in it. When they go to sleep you sleep peacefully, too. But all the same, now and then one or another wakes up. When the second stirred there was a ringing in my right ear, a sure sign that a customer was coming. Before he had time to cross the threshold I tackled him: "Either your boots must be so clean they shine, or you'll leave them outside together with the feet in them!"

The third spoon — I mean the third thought — slid down and stuck just below my ribs where it kept screaming: "Eat! Eat! Eat!"

The cap? I never parted with it even at night. What if Comrade Director suddenly turned up and I was sleeping without it! And then, too, I couldn't take it off, it seemed to have grown onto my head. And my whiskers.... Every morning Gitse moistened them with a mixture of maize oil and water and they stood out like spears.

One day a fly fell into Tikhon Ivanych's soup. The soup was cold borshch and in his hurry he swallowed it. With our combined efforts we got that vile insect out of him. You know how? With a thread, the way you get out a cork that's fallen inside a bottle.

Tikhon Ivanych at once called a meeting. It took him half an hour to recover himself, then he spoke for a solid hour and could have gone on longer if a fly hadn't been buzzing by his mouth. At once he gave me the floor.

"Comrades!" I said, and noticed that accursed fly making for me. "You see this fly? I am ready to swallow it if that will save the life of our adored director Tikhon Ivanych." Tears trickled down my cheeks. "Tikhon Ivanych, it was you who picked me up on the street and made a man of me. At that time you called me brother. But I call you father!" Tears overcame me, my whiskers wilted and for a whole minute I couldn't say a word. "This is what I want to say, comrades, I want to and I will! Who could cause that fly to fall into Tikhon Ivanych's soup and no other? Who, I ask? Only a vicious enemy. You've nothing to say? I know you, you're all vicious. Here, open your mouths and we'll take a look." All opened their mouths and the fly, frightened, flew straight into the wide mouth of Gitse. "There he is, the enemy, Tikhon Ivanych! That is the fly you swallowed. I recognised it! I told Gitse to execute the villain, but he let it go!"

After the meeting Tikhon Ivanych ordered Gitse to hang the ladle in its place, and hand in his resignation. Gitse left and I began to put on weight. Tikhon Ivanych gave me all the leftovers from his own table and I ate everything he didn't want. Even kings didn't eat what Tikhon Ivanych and I ate. In ten days I put on thirteen kilograms, eight hundred and fifty grams.

My old woman praised me: "You see how plump you are? And it's all because you heeded my words." She tapped my head with her finger, she liked the sound it made.

Everything went ideally. Only one thing troubled me — my pants. They had got so tight that every thread vibrated like a violin string. From the time I started sleeping in them, I couldn't get them off.

One day I was sitting by the cloakroom. I was still putting on weight, I was happy and laughed at my friends who had round heads and were lean. Suddenly there came a ringing in

my right ear — the side towards the door, and in my left, the side nearest the director's office. What should I do? Where should I go? I thought so intensively that I almost fainted.

The three men who entered were in black. Tikhon Ivanych turned pale when he saw them. "A commission. Inspection," he said. "Bow as low as you can. I'll give you a bucket of borshch."

I turned to face the commission and wanted to bow but — I couldn't. Behind me Tikhon Ivanych nudged me nervously. "Try again. Two buckets!" I managed to bend just a little. "Lower, lower! Three buckets of borshch and one of cereal!" But then — there was a dreadful crack, a strong gusty wind blew and snatched the cap off my head.

* * *

So that's what happened to me. And when? In my old age. A disgrace. When I got home I grabbed the scissors and cut off my whiskers. The pension? It turned out that the office had made a mistake, and had now sent my pension for four months. M'yes. So I said goodbye to the cloakroom, and Tikhon Ivanych to the restaurant.

I cut off my whiskers but I couldn't bear to part with them. Here they are, in my inside pocket, wrapped in a handkerchief. Would you like to see them?

EMILIAN BUKOV

*Silence**

It's sinking, sinking lower and lower. Where? How can firm ground sink into itself? An earthquake? No. But all the same it's sinking. Delirium!

"Stop it!"

The exclamation was only in thought.

But the earth is sinking. And nobody all round. Nobody? Where are all the people? "I can rise up only amidst humanity." Who said that? Silence. So sometimes even silence acquires a voice.

"I beg you, silence, be not silent!"

In tangled eyelashes poppies bloom.

"Poppies! Do you, at least, speak a word!"

Strange. The poppies are silent. So not all that is beautiful is also eloquent. And the poppies are truly beautiful.

It's sinking, the earth's sinking again.

Over the walls green colts gallop. Green horses on the walls. Like that time on the steppe, near Orhei. What's happening in Orhei now? Perhaps it lies in ruins. For the earth is sinking.

The thickets of reeds have a blue shimmer, they run in waves before the wind.

"Don't splash, Mikhail! The water's cold!... You bad boy, you've eaten all the poppies from my lips! Aren't you ashamed!"

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Now I'm quite warm. Morning gives birth to day. And five whole suns to warm it.

"No, ten!"

"Don't be silly!"

"Ten suns. That's exact."

"Well, you're good at arithmetic."

"Almost a mathematician."

"Stop eating poppies."

It's sinking, sinking again....

"Hold it firmly, Father! Catch the reins! Look, now even the calf's pulling better. You see, the furrows are deeper! There'll be good grain and sweet buns for Easter!"

"Sure there will!"

"Leave Father alone! Don't beat him!... Oh, what are we going to do now? Get up, Father!... The deacon chants so pitifully, you can only cry. And you can't cry away all your tears before you come to the cemetery."

My forest, my beloved forest.

"Who's singing? The trees?"

"Yes, the forest is coming to me like a green tide. You see how the autumn forest tosses?"

"I see.... Why are you tossing, forest?"

"You know it well?"

"For as long as I remember the Dniester. I remember it without rain, without wind, and its roots go deep into the ground."

"Was it the forest told you so?"

"No, the earth. But the earth is sinking! Stop it, Mikhail! I'm frightened."

"Why doesn't it rock me, for my time too has come."

"Your time will never come.... Mikhail, I beg you, make the earth stop sinking! You don't know how? Take pity upon the earth, yours and mine."

"I have another desire."

"So have I.... But why do those green patches race about on the wall?"

"You mean the green horses?"

"They've gone. There aren't any more.... I'm cold...."

When the Siguranza agent emptied the third bucket of water Veronica opened her eyes. Then shut them quickly — she didn't want to see that handsome impudent face.

"Are you alive or only pretending to be?" she heard as in a dream.

"Dolt! Pour another bucketful."

"All right, just let me take a swallow of brandy first."

Silence.... What a pity silence is voiceless, as long as this world has been. And besides, there is something hidden in it that is bottomless.

If a person cannot feel his hands, does that mean he is dead? "I think, therefore I am?" I live. Rubbish! I've died? Try to think it out. Think.... So I exist. Who said that? Kant never said it because it was said by Descartes. Gaudeamus igitur...

"Mikhail, quiet! Row to the bank, there are black swans overtaking us."

"White."

"No, black.... Don't twist my arm!"

"I'll make you talk!"

No, I'm dead. Green horses galloping over the cement. On the walls. Galloping. You see them?

"Someone seems to be crying."

"Dolt! She's dead. Another splash."

"Water?"

"Blockhead! Look under the table, there ought to be a bottle there."

What's that — the earth sinking or silence rising? The

earth is hot. Red-hot silence. But can silence become red-hot?

It's cold....

What's that — snow, or the sky weeping white tears? No, those are not tears. They are many-coloured smiles. Parachutes are descending. Hundreds of them. Thousands. It's like children carrying flowers. A moving flowerbed. ...Yes. I remember that year, a year filled with special meaning.

Damn that memory! It awakens imagination. On its transparent canvas June of forty can be seen dimly....

"Hi there! You!"

Those three roughly articulated words struck her eardrums. Her hearing was so clear and sensitive!

"Hi, you! Still alive?"

Who's that sighing? The torturer? So torturers can sometimes sigh, too.

It's snowing.... No, the earth is sinking....

The keys slipped into the pocket of the grey coat mother bought in the Lafayette Gallery.

"It looks beautiful on you, Nica."

"Call me Veronica. 'Nica' sounds childish."

"You're very beautiful. Your big eyes burn like the lamps on the Calle Victoria."

"No, like candles at a funeral."

"Silly. The candles are lighted the night before."

"I didn't know that, Mum."

"You don't need to know it. In your times the earth will rear up and mountains be born many times."

"How old am I, Mum? Please don't kiss me like that.... You're a dear, but all the same don't kiss me so hard.... Look, this is where I do my studying, opposite the Mikhai

Vityaz statue. You see how he holds the sceptre? He's threatening to hit me with it."

"*Why don't you want to be Chimidjiu's wife?*"

"*I'll never marry, Mum.*"

"Did she say something?"

"Not sure. Either her lips moved or she sighed."

"Dolt, you've only one thing in your head! She must know a lot of secrets, bullhead!"

"Yessir!"

"Just it. She knows all the partisans here. But —"

"She seems to have lost her voice. A pity, she sang like a nightingale."

"Wasn't it you burned her tongue with stinking matches?"

"I was obeying orders, sir."

"You don't know how to work neatly. Take that for your trying, bullhead!"

"Oh, oh, oh! That hurts! Don't hit me! I'm not her...."

"She's gone. And we'll both get hell for it. Get out of here."

The earth's sinking.... Falling. Where? How long? And how much can that endless volcano throw up? Whom does the fire consume?

Iorga betrayed me. Campfires. Galileus, Bruno.... That's history. Campfires in the Bessarabian woods. Good, when enemies burn.

"Listen, girl. I'm a doctor. I'm not your enemy. Don't be foolish. You only live once. Your heart's still beating. And your warm breast breathes. What beautiful breasts you have!... Syringe!"

"Ready, doctor."

Mosquito bites. Trifles. What if I try to open my eyes?... Impossible!

Dead silence. Is the earth still collapsing? It's gone mad, the earth....

Enemies are falling. And again — snow, and those June parachutes. How lovely.

Somebody's crying. Who for?

And snow, snow....

Veronica knew she was beautiful. Her mirror told her. Although actually, she consulted it rarely, only when she had to subdue her rebellious hair somehow. But the mirror's reflection was only a flat copy of Veronica's somewhat long face with the fleeting smile that played in her eyes, cheeks and lips. And the tale that pretty girls are stupid is an old lie made up by the plain ones for consolation.

Veronica liked German. She had liked it ever since she started going to the lyceum in Kraiov. How did a Bessarabian girl from near Orgeyev come to be in that distant Oltan town? Her father, a small businessman, moved there in search of a better living.

Now and then Veronica went to stay with her relatives; they already regarded her as a Rumanian.

After graduating school the daughter of Dumitru Syrbu went to "little Paris", as Bucharest rather conceitedly called itself. She entered the literature and philosophy faculty.

The teacher of German was Professor Myndrescu, strict and pedantic. Veronica also went to lectures by a Frenchman, Debrain. She was a hard-working student and always got good marks. But it was not only in the work that she stood out, the most attractive and choosy of the future scientists made a dead set for her. But Veronica had no use for any of them. People were puzzled. "A queer girl. Why doesn't she want to marry? A coquette?"

She lived just as everybody did. Years passed, varying years. Suddenly — the explosion. War jerked them all out of their accustomed ruts. And it had to be just then that Veronica met the one man. He was strong, people called him a handsome fellow, and he loved life. He was called Mikhail, like her favourite poet. That made him extra dear. Sometimes, when she sat alone, imagining their peaceful future, Veronica tried to compose verses, in imitation of Eminescu.

The calendar of war was marked with red dates. But these were not holidays, they were like threads of blood.

Veronica got her assignment from the underground district committee; she cropped her hair like a boy, put on an SS uniform and went into the forest where a big German arms dump was being built.

Many Bessarabian lads were working there. The new overseer was strict, she was praised by the chiefs of the special SS detachment, especially Paulus — no relative of the German Field-Marshal captured near Stalingrad.

"Where did you learn to hate Bessarabians like this?" Paulus asked one day.

"I've lived among those cattle, but my mother was German. Yes, pure German, *reinrassige*."

"Then why are you so cold to me? I'm an Arian and handsome."

"I'm betrothed. He's a brave officer, a hero. He's at the front beating the Russians."

Veronica always went about with a long whip. Every now and then she would lash the workers. The blows from her small hands were not very painful, but the Bessarabians hated her with a deadly hatred. "That stinking German bitch," they called her.

Weapons began disappearing from the dump with

growing frequency. Suspicion fell on several Bessarabian workers and engineers. They were tortured for a long time. Veronica was present at the interrogation.

"Those bandits are capable of anything," she told the torturers.

But when the girl at last dragged herself late at night to her tiny room and bolted the door behind her, she would sit for a long time, motionless, in an old armchair. She gazed into emptiness and saw the faces of the Bessarabians. And she remembered her father, who had died in poverty just before the war.

Often she would sit like that till dawn.

"Another three machine-guns vanished," said Paulus again. "We had to shoot the same number of Bessarabians."

"Quite right!" cried Veronica. "I always tell you, those bandits are capable of anything."

The machine-guns went to the partisans. The Moldavians' gnarled hands had long learned every kind of work upon the land, now they mowed down the enemy.

Sometimes Veronica would pass with her whip along the lines of Bessarabian workers pushing heavy metal wheelbarrows loaded to the top with stones. Through the rumbling she could hear their muffled curses: "German bitch... flops down under all the nazis — all right, her time will come."

Oh my dears, she would whisper to herself, if only you knew how I love you all! But it has to be this way, it has to. Three of ours died last evening but three hundred of the fascists are killed. What else can I do? Tell me!

If only she could have died instead of any of those shot!

The forest slept peacefully. Veronica trod the dry fallen leaves. What a strange destiny! Earlier, they cast their quiet shade upon people, now those same people trample them.

A cold wind tossed the ancient oaks and maples. Why are you tossing, forest? And to you, poet, good night. I love my Mikhail.

"What are you doing here?"

The girl barely had time to hide the heavy key of the storehouse in her pocket and smile sweetly.

"Why, I had a headache, dear Paulus, so I came out for a stroll."

"I heard carts rattling."

"Why, yes, partisan carts'll be here in a moment."

"You look pretty when you're joking."

"Of course I joke — why not, with the keys in my pocket!"

"If I don't kiss you I'll die right here."

"I'll watch with pleasure."

A gust of wind carried away the sound of a shot. Where?

Here was the cart. And two partisans. How often they had received weapons from Veronica's hands! The prints of her fingers were on nearly all the partisan triggers.

Suddenly — nazis rushed at them. The fight was brief.

And when the dead girl lay flat upon the cement floor in the torture chamber, her hands, mutilated by red-hot iron, were like vine leaves. The yellow leaves of a late autumn vine.

It is late autumn. I kneel before a small neat mound. I look at the plain oak cross. It was set up at the request of her mother. But Veronica, like all of us, had absolutely no belief in God.

YAKOB BURGHIU

*Vasile the Wolf**

The pencil persistently tapped the empty water-bottle. Demanding silence.

The hall roared turbulently. The windows rattled. Tongues of flame flickered continuously in lamps that looked swollen with the heat.

Night passed along the village hanging black drapes over windows, and arrived at the club. It crept up to the acacias and waited for passions to die down.

But now windows and doors flew open simultaneously and thunder burst from inside, mingling with the voices of storm-cloud above. For the third day the sky had frowned over the village. Flint sparked. Eyes sparked. Vasile hammered the table waiting for the lightning to die away. The flame reflected in the eyes of the seated crowd merged into a solid rainbow. Vasile's eyes hurt, blinded by it.

"They're all bawling," Vasile thought confusedly, "every last one of them!" The pencil tapped the bottle with growing stubbornness, but the sound of it was drowned.

"...the sowing, the sowing...," came to him from the general din, and the rainbow gave way to black strips like furrows. They stood before him with the conviction of reality: scanty green stalks rising here and there. Wheat.... The lonely stalks rose like upheld arms and pointed fingers at him, rebuking him....

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"...the cattle, the cattle...," a woman's shrill voice pierced his ear and the scanty green faded and darkened. Vasile heard the hungry lowing of cows.

"...the light, the light...," the yellow circles swam over the hall while tongues of flame reached out towards him like claws.

"Kick him out! We don't want a chairman like him!" shouted Costake Negru, leaping up onto the platform and glaring at Vasile.

The pencil hung motionless by the bottle. Two pairs of eyes, black and blue, met like rapiers. Vasile felt the rainbow wind round him like a hot ribbon with one end boring into his chest.

"Me?!" he shouted, trying to out-roar the roaring hall.

"You, brother! Your way's out!"

Vasile raised the water-bottle over his head as though ready to hurl it into the hall. He tried to say something but a drop of water fell from its mouth and splashed onto his nose. With a dull crash the bottle smashed on the floor.

Silently, quickly, Vasile left the platform. And again that rainbow plagued him, following him to the very door....

"Stop howling like you were at a funeral," Vasile rasped at Catinca and flung himself down on the bed without waiting to pull off his boots.

She wiped her eyes with a corner of her apron and sat down beside him. She fastened the buttons on his shirt, and went on lamenting, combing his hair with her fingers.

"What'll we do now, Vasile? The new house isn't ready yet. It would not have mattered if they should have put you out of being chairman when there'd been enough of all. But this way.... In Stolnicheni they put Petra Bucataru out, but he was clever, he'd got him a house built in town."

Vasile gave her such a look that she wilted into silence. He rose, flung his jacket round his shoulders and went out.

Night had taken over, it whispered in the courtyards, it glanced in through open doors and dark windows and swayed the tops of the acacias.

Vasile chose a big stone under an apple-tree by the gate and sat down. Took out a cigarette. Struck a match. Drew in smoke. And felt quieter. He looked down. Aha! There was a thatched roof. Hidden itself, the brute, among the branches. The cigarette held in the corner of his mouth glowed, a red spark. Vasile reached out to the apple-tree. Disturbed, it shook and the crown rustled. The branch bent in his hand.

"All right, Costake, wait till I meet you on a narrow trail," Vasile hissed through his teeth, moving out from under the tree.

The branch trembled as it returned to its place.

A light stared at the road from beyond the fence. Voices came from round the curve.

"The meeting's over," thought Vasile, stamped out his cigarette end and crept along the fence.

"Vasile's asleep," said someone, seeing the darkened windows.

"Dreaming of great things." Boots creaked by the fence.

"Quiet, lads, he may hear you. Why rub salt on it? The meeting was enough."

Miron and Terente, herdsmen, needed the winery chief and stopped. But not for long.

"He'll be all right, he can be a herdsman or something. Maybe he'll learn a bit of sense," Miron persisted.

Vasile stood, shrunk together, until the voices died away down the hill. Then he straightened cautiously, as though afraid of wakening the lane. More footsteps. Who the devil could it be now? Vasile knelt and peered through the fence.

Him. Tall and thin. Wearing a hat. Walking slowly. Him. Costake Negru.

The fence creaked under his hands. He felt around. His fingers found a stone. Gripped it. Vasile rose by the gate. There he was. Coming. The footsteps were quite close.

"Wait for me," a woman called after Costake Nergu.

"What is it, Vasilutse?" Negru turned.

"Wait, I'm afraid of the dog."

Vasile pressed against the fence. What, had he another heart? One beat in his breast, another in his hand. And how hard it beat! His fingers unclasped. With a sour smile he laid the stone on the fence. Two figures went down the hill.

Day dawned. A swallow flew from the big gate, shot into the valley, flashed through the village and out over the highway.

"Quick, quick," Vasile told himself as he set off.

He had walked about four kilometres from the district town. He stopped near Vâlya Selishtii's house. He didn't want to meet anyone so he turned off into the reeds to keep out of sight. After some paces he saw a pond girdled by reeds and sedge.

He sat down, crushing the grass. The sky was a bell, the sun its tongue.

"The people are right," rang in his ears. Those words were wedged there and gave him no peace.

He glanced up at the dull sky, lay down on his side and looked at the small waves. A leaf floated down from the broom over him. The water took the leaf into its embrace.

The sky dried white grains of cloud on its stove. A ruddy sun peeped out from the clouds and turned somersaults in the pond, the broom dipped and swayed. Vasile fell asleep.

He was wakened by the buzzing of a gadfly. Jumped up. Looked for the culprit. Nothing there.

...His road took him into the forest. There was no other path. It was the one trodden by his forbears. The village was visible at the end of the valley. Through the green of it he seemed to see arms stretched out. To him. Perhaps they were calling him.... Vasile peered forward from under his hand. He withdrew into the shadow to avoid being seen. He would stay here a day or two, until the water had settled in the Prut, it was muddy from the endless rain. He withdrew farther into the shadows. So that nobody should see him, now or after. Let them seek him, let them call him....

The forest grows.... Leaves fall, leaves turn green.... Surging thoughts....

For two days Vasile had stayed in the forest. With daybreak he went to the edge to watch the village getting up. The smell of smoke came to him. Once he even started off towards it, but day overtook him and he returned. And when it grew dark he consoled himself with the thought that he would not find the road. The previous evening it had rained. The forest gave him what shelter it could, but nevertheless he got very wet. He could not sleep all night. Heavy clouds passed over the sky. He would have to make himself a shelter, otherwise the rain might catch him again. He had got hold of an axe the previous evening. Snatched it from the woodcutters. He had prepared four posts, he needed one more. Ah, there was a good branch. It teased him from the top of an oak. He went up to the tree. Perfect. Only rather high. But that only challenged him. He thrust the axe through his belt, embraced the trunk with arms and legs, summoned up all his strength and began climbing unhurriedly. He got through the tangle of branches and

reached the place he had marked. Four times the oak trembled. Then the branch crashed down. Vasile climbed down. So you thought I couldn't get at you, eh? He lopped off the smaller branches and the end, then carried the posts under a crab apple-tree. He had taken a fancy to the place because it was not particularly noticeable to any chance person. He thrust the posts into the ground. Covered the shelter with dry leaves. When he decided everything was finished he sat down by the entrance and realised that he was wildly hungry. What he could have done to a hunk of fresh bread! Cabbage buns swam before his eyes, buns stuffed with goats' milk cheese and potatoes, steaming pot of borshch, fried spring chicken in sour cream and a glass of amber wine. But all he could swallow was his own saliva. He thrust his hand into his pocket and took out his cigarette case. He still had five cigarettes. He would smoke one now, leave a second for the evening, and the rest he broke in half. He looked up at the sky — midday. He rose and wandered through the trees.

There they were, working on the far side. The wood-cutters. A tree crashed down, branches splintered. Just the right moment. Three leaps and the bag was in his hands. Back, at a run. He stopped some distance away. Listened.

"Hi, let's break off for dinner," one of them said.

"All right, set it out, we're coming."

Silence.

"Hi, Sofronice, I told you to hang the bag on a tree!"

"Why, what's happened?"

"You can suck your fingers for dinner. Some animal's made off with it."

Vasile vanished into the thicket.

...He did not touch the food. He left the bag on the path. Lay down on the grass and gazed into the sky. Night crept

up, gliding from tree to tree. Leaves fell. Leaves shone green....

Every man has within him a grain of the sun, a fragment of the moon, his star. Each one has his own star, his own aim. Then why had they put him, Vasile Cojocaru, out of the position of chairman? Just because people had got so devilish smart these days. That was it.

He remembered the meeting again. The shouting in the club. What did Costake want of me? Vasile squatted on his heels.

Negru's satisfied face looked at him from under the bark of the oak.

If you wanted something, why didn't you say so? Waited for me to come looking for you to find out what you needed?...

Negru smiled and vanished. He'd always been like that since he was a boy. Proud. Hadn't changed. Vasile coughed and rose. He was chilled to the marrow. He'd have to make a fire. Not much deadwood round about. He went to the trees. Dry twigs cracked underfoot.

He made a pile of twigs and dry leaves and set a light to it. Flames shot up noisily. He turned and stared, thunderstruck.

A dog emerged from the forest. Two flames burned under its forehead. It reached the shelter with a couple of bounds. Sniffed. Saw Vasile, stopped alertly, then moved back and halted in the middle of the glade, ready to spring. Two live coals in the middle of the glade. A wolf.... The man stared into the animal's eyes. Stared unwinkingly. The wolf made a sideways leap and vanished into the thicket. Vasile searched the bushes, returned to his fire, threw on some more twigs. Little by little sleep overcame him and felled him beside the fire.

The sun was high overhead when Vasile opened his eyes. He did not want to move. His whole body felt flaccid. Leaves fell. Leaves lay green. Thoughts.... All the same, that Costake had a devil in him!

All day the forest rustled. Then it quietened. The sun burned the sky in the west. Evidently the celestial stove had been well heated today. Leaves fell. Leaves shone green. Vasile did not rise. He toasted one side, then the other. Ironed out all the dry leaves and grass.

Costake's face looked out from the bark as it had the previous evening.

"Yes, brother, I forgot that the year before last you came to me and complained your roof was leaking."

"If it had been only me you forgot, but —"

"You are right, Costake," Vasile agreed quietly. "I forgot everyone."

"And everything," said Costake with a friendly smile.

Something warm filled Vasile's heart and it felt somehow lighter. The village was asleep.... What if he came knocking at midnight?

He rose, picked up the axe and went.

The wind blew in his face — the forest was thinning. And there, a couple of paces away, he saw the two burning coals. The wolf was beside the abandoned bag. It sprang at him. The axe swung up and down. Two strong paws knocked him down. Eyes starting, he got to his feet and looked at the defeated animal.

The bow tests the first string, the second, the third, the fourth. All unharmed. And melody pours forth, born in the depths of his heart, rising to life. The grass, the trees, the moon, the stars listened. Vasile smiled.

By dawn the wolf was skinned. The skin would come in handy. He rolled it under his arm and came out to the edge of

the forest. The sun peeped up behind the hill. The sky was vast, enormous as never before.

A man needs the sun to awaken him and warm his heart, and the moon to caress him, and the earth to walk over in joy, and he has an absolute need of the great sky, studded with stars.

Catinca and Ionike must be tired of waiting for me, thought Vasile as he came to the path which led to the road.

At a christening a year later, after several glasses of wine, he told of his adventure. Now the whole village knows the story. And he is nicknamed Vasile the Wolf.

For a couple of years Ionike rolled about in the dust with that wolf skin. Then one day the Prut carried it away. Ionike said nothing and Vasile never asked what had become of it.

*The Sun on Crutches**

The house where Grigore spends his days stands beside us, on the corner. Early in the morning the hospitably open door invites the sun: come in. But it is shy, it shifts from foot to foot, as it were, hesitating to cross the threshold. It takes sly peeps, as though wanting to know the bootblack's secrets. When it gets tired of this it looks in through the window. This house has glass everywhere. Probably whoever built it knew that the sun is very inquisitive.

The sun likes it here. And it helps Grigore, too — it makes his boots shine.... Grigore does not stop it from bathing in his deep blue eyes. And when the nightingale trills in its cage, both sun and bootblack, hands round their faces like children, listen to it. The three are good friends.

Grigore's shoulders are broad. His hair is touched with grey. His eyebrow is crossed by a scar. Thick chestnut lashes

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shade eyes like the autumn sky. One knee will not bend — the sinews are wooden.

Grigore is not very sociable, but he has one good friend, small Ionike, snub-nosed, freckled, aged five.

The day had wakened, the street began to stir and fill with noise. High up on scaffolding, builders touched the clouds with their bricks. Somewhere a train could be heard, hastening to the town.

Grigore dropped some grains into the cage, hung the wadded jacket he had worn at the front neatly over the back of his chair and sat down. From under a bench he drew out a pair of black boots, moved his polish closer and set to work. Ionike, sunning himself by the door as usual, rubbed his eyes and looked at Grigore.

"Uncle Grigore! My dad says you didn't always belong here. Is that true?"

"Yes."

Ionike loved his town. He was born there and a little while before he had moved into a new house.

"Uncle Grigore! Where's your own house?"

"On the bank of the Dniester, Ionel," and Grigore sighed heavily.

"And won't you ever go back there — never at all?"

Grigore gave him a long look. M'yes, the boy is getting bigger. The nightingale shakes itself and begins to sing. The blue eyes lift to the clear summer sky. And the sky is reflected in the river. Eyelashes flicker. A field of ripe wheat ripples uneasily. A road winds through the fields. Three are hurrying — two crutches and a top-boot.

The eyelashes slowly sink. Instead of the house with four windows looking out on the road, a large wide door and two young poplars before the facade, a weed-grown hole now lies among smoke-blackened ruins. There is the stone on which

they sat the whole night through, counting the stars. Here by the gate Anica let him embrace her. Here two orphans who did not remember parents taken early by death joined their lives.

"Why, Uncle Grigore?" Ionike asked again.

The crutches and top-boot turn abruptly.

The eyes are soft. The wall has a reed gate. The crutches and boot enter. An old woman is sitting on the earth bank round the house, nodding sleepily.

"Good day, Aunt Angelina," the lips whisper.

"Good day to you too," the old woman answers. "Only tell me, who ye might be?"

"Grigore, Teodor Ursu's son."

The old woman peers at him and the cloud clears from her face.

"Grigorash? So ye've come home, seemingly. And folks said the earth was your home. Lookee there, now! The dead come to life!"

"Aunt Angelina, where's my Anica?"

The old woman bends a heavy look on him.

"Since the day when the bomb fell on the house, there's none has seen her."

The sun breaks loose from the sky and falls. A hot snake winds itself round his head and shuts out the light. Midday becomes night.

Seeing the sun gone from Grigore's eyes, the old woman adds, "There's some say she went away somewhere. Who knows, mebbe she's still living...."

Ionike stroked the threshold, then raised his head.

"I know why, Uncle Grigore!"

"Why?"

"Because it's hard for you to walk with that leg that's got wooden sinews!"

With a deep breath the sun at last decided to enter but bumped its head against the door-post. The door was low....

It was almost twelve years since Grigore had come to the town. So many people.... Sometimes the dead come to life....

"Uncle Grigore, there's a woman come to have her shoes cleaned." Ionike tugged his shoulder.

The sun entered with the red shoes.

"Anica wore shoes like that...."

He saw shapely sunburned calves. A lightning flash in his mind: Her? He raised his eyes. He saw only the sun, and in its rays a dark face with black eyes.

"Anica!" rang through the street.

Laughing, Anica sprayed him with sunbeams. But why were they cool? Strange. He opened his eyes.

"Are you feeling ill?" the woman asked.

"No."

It was not Anica.

...The sun had taken her place.... Grigore looked at it with eyes deep as the summer sky.

"She won't come now," he said.

"There's still time till evening," said Ionike from the threshold and flung the door open wide.

MIKHAIL CHIBOTARU

*The Encounter**

I

How would he face his family? What would his mother say? And what would they say in the village? That as soon as the going got tough he'd ducked out? That he was dull? What was he to do now?

When he had definitely decided to leave college, everything seemed simple and easy.

"What the hell do you want, Gheorghe? Drop all those idiotic ideas, get down to your books," his friends had said. "You can learn, you've got it in you. If you don't you'll be kicking yourself later on."

"No. I'm leaving," said Gheorghe decidedly.

He carefully packed his clothes and filled a string bag with books. His textbooks he left behind.

"You take them," he said to his room-mates. "I won't be needing them any more."

He shook hands with them all. And felt a kind of stinging sadness. They had been living together for four long years....

Four years.... But Gheorghe had had another dream, to become an engineer, to work with machinery. He had never thought of being a doctor. He had given way to his parents' urgings.

Everything had seemed to be going well, too. But this summer there was hospital work, and when he had to

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perform a simple appendectomy his hands shook and a mist rose before his eyes. In fact, he fled disgracefully from the hospital. ...What sort of doctor can I be if I can't control my hands or my head? No, it isn't my calling.

After all, he thought at leisure, I could graduate all right, there isn't much left. But what about afterwards? Spend my whole life on work I dislike? Your work ought to mean everything to you. Like the kind of love that comes to a man only once. You have to find a real life's work or you just wither away, asphyxiate.

.. The door of the medical students' hostel slamm d. He would never enter it again. But still he had a queer, empty feeling, and an incomprehensible regret stung him.

In the bus Gheorghe recovered himself. The old man beside him was a joker and never shut his mouth for a moment.

The village was eight kilometres from the highway; this last stretch he would have to walk, unless he got a lift on something going his way.

He left the bus, turned off onto the dirt road that led to the village, and halted. He set down his suitcase on a reddish strip of unreaped buckwheat that jostled the verge, put the string bag on top to avoid soiling the books, and looked about with a sense of melancholy. The maize and sunflower were probably in long ago, black ploughed land stretched to the horizon and the clods were swollen from yesterday's rain. Far away, towards Great Hartopul, young kolkhoz orchards were warmly copper-coloured in the tired light of the October sun. Four years ago there had not been a single tree there. And now.... People had been working. Only he, Gheorghe — what had he done in those four years? Sat through a few pairs of trousers, occupying the place that belonged to a future doctor....

He picked up his things and walked on, as though hoping to escape bitter thoughts. The autumn sun had not yet dried the dirt road, every now and then his boots sank into mud and he tried to follow the broad ruts.

The trail led up a hill and there, right on the crest, stood a truck.

If I catch it I can get a lift, thought Gheorghe, and quickened his steps. But the suitcase and the bag were a nuisance and the ground was slippery. He was red and sweating when he drew level with the truck.

"Hi, Gheorghe!" the driver greeted him — it was a young fellow from his village who had evidently been here for some time, dying of boredom and loneliness. "Come on a visit, eh?"

Gheorghe did not answer the question. He dropped his suitcase and bag in the body of the truck among the milk cans and grasped the driver's hand.

"What are you standing here for, Dumitru? Basking in the sun like a ladybird?"

"I can't just go off and leave her," said the driver, with a jerk of his head at the truck. "I've been stuck here since early. And if there'd been any coming by to throw a word to. But not a soul all day. I'm glad you came along at last. Have you a cigarette?"

"What's wrong?" asked Gheorghe, holding out a packet.

"Dunno. Something got mucked up. What else with a truck? She's got her tricks, this one has," said the driver disgustedly.

"Let's poke around a bit and see what she has to say." Gheorghe threw off his jacket and rolled up his shirt-sleeves. "Give me the spanners."

"Don't get yourself dirty for nothing. After all, I am the driver."

"Give me the spanners, I tell you. I was once a driver, too. In the army. I liked messing about with machines." His voice held a note of regret for a past not so very distant. "Got something to spread under me?"

Half an hour later he held out the spanners to Dumitru.

"Let's try. Maybe she's got tired of playing tricks."

Gheorghe pressed the starter and the engine came to life. A strong smell of petrol filled the cab. He let out a sigh of relief.

"Let me drive a bit," he begged.

The truck started, groaned its way up a steep hill, and gathered full speed only when the road levelled off, warmed by the meagre autumn sunshine and dried by the wind.

II

Here was the turn bringing houses from Soch village in sight. Only a little left now to Varvareni. It lay just over the hill. Gheorghe speeded up. Before the bridge over the stream that divided the valley into halves he had to slow down a bit to let a cart finish crossing.

As they entered the village the sound of weeping came through the open window of the cab. Gheorghe braked before the house where the trouble seemed to be.

"What's happened, aunt Catrina?" Dumitru asked a woman running in aimless desperation about the yard, the corner of her apron pressed to her eyes. She recognised him and took a few steps towards the truck.

"Gafitsa Syle's dying," she whispered and clapped her hand to her mouth as though afraid the old man with the scythe, hearing the word, would definitely settle in that house.

"What from?"

"How'd I know?" The woman shrugged and brought her apron up to her eyes again. "Up to yesterday she was all

right, and today all of a sudden — giving up her soul to God. Awful! And she's quite young, too."

"Gafitsa? Spataru? The one who went to school in our village?" Gheorghe asked, appalled. He remembered Gafitsa as she had been at school — she had been in his form, a sturdy girl with merry black eyes and three tiny moles on her right cheek.

Wailing and lamentation came from the house. Gheorghe jumped down from the cab and ran to the door, followed by Dumitru. They halted on the threshold, shaken by what they saw. Gafitsa lay on the bed by the window. Her face was waxen yellow with the three moles like small stars. By her head an old woman held a lighted candle and whispered something of which only "Lord God! Lord God!" could be distinguished. Two children, a boy of about five and a litle girl of three, huddled against the bed, their frightened eyes turning now to the weeping women, now to a girl frozen in a corner with a syringe in her hand.

"What's wrong with her?" Gheorghe asked.

The women quietened. Dumitru whispered to the eldest, Gafitsa's mother.

"He's a doctor. From Kishinev."

"Oh, please —" She flung herself at Gheorghe's feet. "Don't let her die. Save her, dear doctor...."

"What's wrong with her? Has she been ill long?"

The girl with the syringe came up to Gheorghe.

"Haemorrhage."

"The cause?"

The girl was bashfully silent, but Gafitsa's mother began lamenting.

"My daughter, my daughter, what have you done to yourself?"

Gheorghe understood. Authoritatively he told the women to leave the room, went up to the bed and took the sick woman's hand. The pulse could hardly be felt. The heart too was weak. He turned to the girl with the syringe.

"Have you got camphor?"

The feldsher* held out the syringe and an ampule, and he made an injection.

"Sekalis?"

"Here."

"Why did you wait so long? Why did you lose time?" Gheorghe almost shouted as he worked to restore the sick woman to consciousness.

"She's been bad some days but I didn't know anything till today," the girl said in a voice that shook with fright. "It's the work of those old women," she added, "and they were afraid to have her taken to hospital."

Gafitsa's eyes opened. To Gheorghe they seemed even larger than he remembered. She did not recognise him.

He gently opened her mouth and gave her some medicine, then put on a cold compress — did everything he could to stop the haemorrhage. He worked with swift accuracy and was surprised to find how well he remembered the things he had been taught, to find that his hands did not tremble, he did not lose his head as he had that time at hospital practice.

At last his efforts were successful, Gafitsa recovered consciousness completely. She gave him a plaintive, pleading smile as though asking pardon for having to receive him in her home like this.

"Tell me — tell me, doctor," said the old woman, trying to read his face. "Will she be all right now?"

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*A qualification between nurse and full doctor. — *Tr.*

"She must be got into hospital at once. As quickly as possible." He turned to the feldsher. "Otherwise there may be complications, and then we can do nothing. Who's the doctor now in Varvareni?"

"There isn't one," answered Dumitru.

"How's that? I thought there was."

"There used to be." Dumitru made a gesture of contempt. "Hung about a few months and made off. Too dull in a village, you see!"

Gheorghe saw there was no time to be lost.

"Go and ring up for an ambulance to be sent from town," he told a man who seemed to be Gafitsa's husband — up to now he had stood at the foot of the bed, lost and bewildered, not saying a word.

"She shan't go, I won't let her, I won't let them take her away!" The old woman wept again loudly. "I don't want my daughter to die among strangers! Oh daughter, my daughter, what have you done?"

The town hospital said the ambulance had only just left for another village, they would send it as soon as it returned.

Gheorghe paced the room, biting his lip. What should he do? Every second counted. Now — now the patient could be saved. But in an hour? Or two? Who could say?

"What if I take her?" asked Dumitru.

"You'll shake her."

The sick woman was again unconscious. Gheorghe made another injection and turned to Dumitru.

"Throw out the cans and prepare a place in the truck."

They brought armfuls of hay, laid several mattresses on it and carefully carried Gafitsa out. The old woman followed, weeping, and her son-in-law tried to quieten her.

"Don't, now, Mother, didn't you hear what the doctor said?"

Gheorghe climbed up into the truck and settled himself beside his patient. Along the way he knocked every now and then on the back of the cab. "Careful, Dumitru, careful! Go fast but don't jolt her!"

The driver did his best, but all the time Gheorghe felt the truck was crawling, and on the rough dirt road the jolting seemed incessant.

III

An old doctor, short and stooping, with large glasses on an eagle nose, went with Gheorghe to the door.

"Don't worry. She'll live. You were just in time." He peered keenly at Gheorghe through thick glasses and gave him a friendly handshake.

Now — straight home. "She will live. You were just in time," sounded in his ears. He remembered Gafitsa's plaintive, helpless, grateful smile, the moles on her cheek that looked like living stars, and was glad he had not let them be extinguished before their time.

Now he felt a surging joy he had not known for a long time. Why had he disgraced himself like that in his hospital practice?

"Is there any hope?" the driver broke the silence.

Gheorghe did not even hear the question. His thoughts were far away. When they came to the last turn, he spoke to Dumitru.

"Drop me on the highway."

Dumitru looked at him, bewildered, and stopped the truck.

"The highway, take me to the highway!" Gheorghe insisted. "And get a move on or I'll miss the bus. Tomorrow morning I'm due at the hospital."

"But I thought you were going home?" asked Dumitru, puzzled.

"Tell the old folks I'll be coming soon. I'll ask for time off and roll along. But now — step on it, do, please!"

The road slipped behind with mad speed. Gheorghe sank into his thoughts again. This was a feeling he had never known. Something had happened — something great and real. And the truck seemed to be crawling, and two years of training still before him seemed like an eternity.

ION CHOBANU

*Blackthorn**

The sun seemed to rise right out of the ground. For some time everything round about had been wrapped in the smoky mist of dawn, then all of a sudden — there it was, huge, bright as it is only in the south, emerging suddenly from behind the forested hill. And at once you felt as though the working day had started ages ago and any who had slept through the sunrise had lost a good part of it. Andrei Blanaru, chairman of the Kirov kolkhoz, knew this feeling better than others, because he had had a good deal of trouble before he managed to get those two tractors for planting from the district tractor base. The Kirov farm was in his own village. After military service Andrei had been for some time secretary of the Komsomol district committee, then studied for four years at the Party school and after that was appointed instructor for the Republic's Central Committee. But this lasted only for a few months because one fine day a group of farmers from his village arrived in Kishinev with a letter that bore a good hundred-and-fifty signatures, inviting Andrei to become farm chairman. It's the will of the people, he was told, and so the next day he woke up chairman.

Now, in the early morning, he stood at the foot of the hill overlooking the village, highly pleased at having at last got those tractors. There was good cause for satisfaction, too. The S-80 drew a furrow right to the spring by the forest,

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* *© Soviet Literature*

straight over the meadow to meet the sun which had just rolled up over the hill.

I paced along the deep tractor-made furrow thinking to follow it to the end, but the chairman called me. So I had to leave my furrow. I do not remember ever having seen him so pleased. Tall and thin, with a youthful colour on his cheeks, he looked much less than his thirty years — more like a strong, slender lad. And the gladness glowing on his face would have sufficed for ten.

"As long as this forest has stood, there've never been such furrows." Andrei took a folding rule out of his pocket and stopped into one to convince himself once more that the forest really never had seen furrows as deep as that.

In the valley a group of men were grubbing out thistles and blackthorn with pickaxes. They sparkled in the sunshine like mirrors. One after the other they swung up, sending sunsparks flashing to cut into the roots of the age-old thicket again.

"Have you seen my father?" Andrei asked me. "He's down there too, grubbing up blackthorn."

All thoughts but one flew from my head. I glanced at Andrei, trying to guess from his face whether he realised the meaning of that first, deep furrow, whether he remembered — or had forgotten. No, when a man's working he has no thought for symbols or comparisons. They come only in moments of leisure.

"Remember, Andrei, that court case over the section where Grandad Nikita's working now with his pick? It was a long, stubborn fight and in the end the big landowner won."

Andrei looked at me and started. Many years ago, when he had been small and his brothers too had been boys, Grandad Nikita had come back from the courthouse one evening and wakened the children. "We're left without land," he told

them. "But the landowner won't get any good out of it, either." He went out into the yard, pulled down the blackthorn hedge and dragged it all into the house. He filled the whole room with blackthorn branches, thickly tangled, and stroking a sharp axe he told the children to get up. He brought his five sons and two daughters down from the stove bed, gave each of them a pair of vine clippers and hung the lamp from the ceiling.

"Cut all this up small," he told them. "Like straw."

They did as he told, and with the first light Grandad Nikita and the children stuffed a sack with the chopped blackthorn and set off for the section which the court had given the big landowner. The landowner had ploughed it up before the case was even decided—he knew very well what the decision would be.

"Go along from end to end, children, sow it thickly along the furrows, and see it goes deep."

"Was it true, what they said in the village?" I asked Andrei.

"Yes," he said and perhaps to convince me, picked up a thick root of blackthorn turned up by the tractor, yellow as a carrot, and gazed at it for a long time.

"They don't make things up in the village," he said and tossed the root far off into the stream that meandered through the valley. He said no more, and indeed, there was no need. I knew it all. I knew that no matter how the landowner struggled with that section, he could do nothing with it. It's not without reason that blackthorn is called the devil's cutting in those parts. It put down deep roots and spread all over the slope, then moved over onto the estate and took such a hold that neither labourers' spades nor deep ploughing could get rid of it. Following an agronomist's

advice, the landowner grazed his sheep on that part of the land in the hope that they would destroy the blackthorn. For a good ten years it remained pasture land. I used to play ball there with Andrei and his brothers. When the sheep had almost destroyed the blackthorn the landowner ploughed up the fallow and for a year or two got good harvests, but then the blackthorn came back savagely to the fat black soil by the forest, and again the land had to be left fallow for grazing. But all that was a long time ago. I was thinking more about this morning. About the picks that sparkled in the valley, especially Grandad Nikita's pick, and about his son striding along beside me, now and then bending to pick up a thick yellow root and throw it far away into the stream.

"We want to set out an orchard here in the autumn," said Andrei. "It's a good place. About twenty hectares on the slope along the side next to the village, and the rest for vineyard. The sun shines here all day. You couldn't find a better place for an orchard and vineyard."

Only a farmer can so delight in a fresh furrow as to follow it from morning to evening behind a tractor. He is accustomed to following a plough, shouting at the oxen and holding the scraper in one hand, the plough handle in the other. There is no necessity to follow a tractor. But either gladness, or old habit — who knows, perhaps a little of both — drew Andrei after it. He picked up a piece of rotten wood from the furrow, or a blackthorn root, and might well have gone on like that until sundown if he hadn't been called to the collective farm board.

When we arrived we found it was not anything really urgent. Leonake Florea's wife was waiting. She had brought an application to leave the kolkhoz and have her accounts settled, as she was divorcing her husband and going to live with her mother in a neighbouring village.

Leaving the field, the chairman at once became a different man, stern and decided.

"How long are you going to keep on quarrelling with Leonake, how many times are you going to drag me from the fields?" he asked sharply.

"I just can't go on, Comrade Chairman. I've tried every way, tried all I could, I can't bear it any more," the woman complained.

"You're a Komsomol member, you ought to re-educate your stupid man."

"I've tried, but it's no good. He just torments and pesters me. He won't let me set foot on the threshold, makes me jump over it."

Leonake Florea stood in the corner, crumpling his sheepskin hat in his hands.

"Still acting like a fool, are you," the chairman said to him.

"Comrade Chairman," Leonake wheezed in high voice that sounded as though he had a cold, "the hens don't crow in my yard."

"You're just a stupid dolt!"

But it wasn't so easy to change Leonake. He had a whole theory: none of the women of his family — his mother, his grandmother — had ever set foot on the threshold, they had always stepped over it, and he wasn't going to break the custom.

"But look here, your wife's a Komsomol member!"

"Member or not, she's got to jump over," said Leonake stubbornly. "With me it's like in the church, Comrade Chairman. Women aren't allowed to go up to the altar, and in my house they mustn't tread on the threshold. Let them jump."

I went with the chairman to his house to see what other

daft ideas this Leonake had — incidentally, he was our contemporary, but grown aged before his time because of his asinine rules and customs. Eh, those customs, worse than the blackthorn on the slope from which the roar of tractors sounded. Leonake lagged behind us — who could say, perhaps he felt a little apologetic. He had forgotten to replace his hat, and walked along with a look as despondent as though all the sparrows had died under his eaves. The house was behind the kolkhoz orchards, and unlike the other village houses nothing in it had changed since the days of his grandfather and great-grandfather. It stood in the middle of a yard like a windmill, roofed with reeds, and with a stork's nest on top.

"He's the best on the farm at grafting," the chairman told me on the way. "His group netted us over thirty thousand this year from grafts alone. And he made twelve hundred rubles in extra pay.

"Try to understand a man like that! At work he gets only praise, but at home — lord save us! For everything he's got some sort of rules —, you can only stand and wonder. And now, blast him, with all his nonsense he's going to lose us the best milkmaid on the farm, a Komsomol member. I don't know if his wife's patience can hold out. I swear, I've reconciled them a dozen times, but for all the good —! She'll leave him. She comes from the next kolkhoz, and it's richer than ours. Even when she was a slip of a girl she was the best milkmaid. A fine hard worker. I had a tough struggle before I could get the district committee to transfer her to our organisation, and that Leonake — he's turning her grey before her time. And not only her, me too."

Leonake himself opened the wicket. It was made of lime bark twisted and knotted together, the way they were made in these parts in past ages. And the door was old-fashioned, a

single leaf, opening in wards. You wouldn't find the like of it in the whole village. All the other houses were tiled and had double doors. And what a likely lad he had been, this Leonake, when he had gone to school with us — disciplined and good at his studies. I remembered his voice — it had been squeaky in those days, too. How we laughed at the "cat that miaowed on the hearth"! It happened once — once only in seven years! — that he had not prepared his lesson, and when the teacher asked what happened to water when the temperature fell below zero, he squeaked from his desk, "When the temperature falls below zero the cat miaows on the hearth." The whole winter long we ran after him shouting, "The cat's miaowing on the hearth!"

Now Leonake was no longer a schoolboy, but a man, married and with a mustache. I had never been in his home, either as a boy when we shared a desk, or later. I don't think the other boys had ever been either. All his family kept to themselves, they had their own queer ways. So I was ready for anything, but what I saw surpassed all expectation. I seemed to have stepped into another world. And not only because the crazy fellow made his wife jump over the threshold. No. That house was like a museum of past times. There was no electric light, no radio. An old lamp flickered and there was a cleanness that was strange, ancient, belonging to past centuries. The chairs which had come down to Leonake from his forefathers were so worn that they shone as though polished. The windows had gratings like those of a monastery. On the walls matchbox tops were pasted, from the first, the beginning of civilisation, to the last with a picture of an earth satellite. I asked if he collected them and the answer left me dumb. He said he had been keeping them to see how much money his family had spent on matches since they stopped using flint and steel.

"None of us have ever had a light from someone else's cigarette," Leonake told me proudly. His wife stood there, flushed, while he explained — for all the world like a guide.

"The matchbox and cigarette packet tops on that wall come to the price of a sheep. Once I sold a sheep and wanted to see how long the money would keep me in smokes."

There was also something in that house which Leonake would have preferred not to disclose: the sun had entered this low-ceilinged house, a Komsomol wife — and shed light in its dark corners.

The poor woman showed us the chemist's scales on which her husband weighed out salt, pepper and flour. Those scales, with weights from five grams upwards, Leonake kept in the entry, on a special little table. The table, like the chairs and the wooden spoons, shone with age, and so did clay pots wound round with wire. You couldn't find an enamel saucepan anywhere in the house. One had the impression that there was no metal in the place at all, everything was made of wood — the gate, the furniture, the utensils, everything. Everything but the chemist's scales.

It was plain how much indignation and detestation had accumulated within that young woman, and the chairman more than once cast significant looks in my direction.

"No, it's no good," he sighed. Evidently he too had entered that door for the first time.

Leonake's wife took us outside and showed us the paddock. Although he now planted onions and parsley in it, he had not taken down the fence and every spring he set up new supports. Formerly oxen had stood there.

"Give me a cart and a horse, Comrade Chairman, and I'll go to my mother."

"And we talked of blackthorn!" said the chairman, and there was a shadow on his face.

"Yes, there's still blackthorn stubbornly holding out here, only tractors won't root this kind out, something different's needed."

Tractors moved over the slope one after the other, and the fresh furrows followed them in straight lines, increasing the ploughed land. Mornings and evenings the people of that village stood at their doors watching the new plantation drawing closer. It would come right up to their houses.

*Cousins**

The cooper Filutsa Lefter stands somewhat aside holding a big hammer and caulking tool, his apron sprinkled with sawdust. Today he has made another barrel. The staves look as though they can fly out in all directions, but hammer and tool are ready. Flames burst from the barrel, staves crackle. Again he damps them and moves aside.

It is autumn. The bare orchards look melancholy. The squeal of electric saws comes from the wine cellar — oak being sawn for staves. The coopers' planes rasp. Even at night carts and trucks loaded with grapes come in through the open gate. The crusher is working. Presses rustle. A thick tube winds like a fabulous snake, its wine-red head vanishing among the hundreds of barrels in the cellar. Filutsa's cousin Ion Lefter, nicknamed the Hare, is busy by the tube.

"And where, drat them, did they get that nickname — Hare?"

The scorched staves seem to smell too strongly and Filutsa, forgetting his query about the origin of his brother's nickname, empties several buckets of water onto the fire. Steam bursts up in a thick column and fills the whole yard. Everything is smothered in fog, even the electric lamp on the post is hardly visible, you seem to be looking at it through a

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thick film. The foreman covers the barrel with an old piece of sacking and the steam seeks an outlet between the staves.

"Get yourselves well steamed," Filutsa tells the staves. He goes down the steps to his cousin Ion in the cellar to ask where the name did come from. For a fortnight they have not been on speaking terms. Today he has decided to talk, to forgive his cousin. So down he goes into the cellar, ostensibly to make sure none of the barrels are leaking. He knows well enough that his barrels never do, but just in case... no harm.... Yes. His cousin likes to act the fool, and just when Filutsa is feeling pleased with life, he teases him with a shout of alarm:

"Leaking! A barrel's leaking!"

When Filutsa comes, Hare has hidden among the barrels, you can look for him all winter and never find him. It is warm in the cellar; hundreds of barrels breathe out the heat of summer through the open bungholes.

"Hi there, Hare, you with the horse's hoofs, where've you got to? Any complaints? Come out and report — ought to be hauled out by the ear!"

Filutsa has served in the army and when he is annoyed, army expressions slip into his speech.

"Get along yourself, get on with your job. I'll call you quick enough if there is anything. Get along, Veronica'll be here in the trap any minute and then I'll come with my complaints all right. You don't let me get on with my work. You can see there's nowhere to pour the wine and you come babbling."

"Aye, you don't make a silk net from a hare's tail. Specially one to sieve flour for Easter cakes! But as for claims — you're an expert at them, I know well."

When Filutsa was put out he liked to use figures of speech. "If you've a head on your shoulders you'll guess what I

mean," he always said. Now he straightened up with difficulty, left the cellar and went back to work.

The fire was out, the steam dissipated. The lamp on the post came to life again like a candle in a flow of air. Everything was visible and clear round about. Filutsa boxed in a barrel not yet knocked together and started to fix the staves. The barrel submitted, the soft staves falling into place as though obeying orders. Filutsa spat on his hands, glanced at the entrance to the cellar from whence he could hear his cousin's voice, and started angrily banging hammer and caulking tool. His movements were even — one step, two blows with the hammer and two with the caulking tool. "He's a lightweight, that Ion," he thought, "even if he is my cousin."

Filutsa certainly wasn't afraid of Veronica, the kolkhoz chairman.

"Found someone to scare me with!" He laughed loudly. "The lightweight!"

He liked people with weight and dignity. He had no use for the kind who wrote for the newspapers. This Ion did, and if only he had written something sensible, but it was just froth! And made friends with the newspaper men! There was his name, now at the top, now at the bottom: "Ion Lefter". Pah, a plague on you! And poked into a man's privacy! Up to now it hadn't been so bad, he wrote about the calves and broken bridges and the maize harvest, but recently he'd got the idea of turning back to the old topics. Stories about the leading workers! May lightning strike you with your stories! If your father's been alive he might have learned you a bit of sense, and turned you into something worthwhile. With those stories of yours a man's ashamed to show himself. Everyone pointing at him.

Filutsa turned the barrel over onto its side and started

making the croze. When he was angry he worked without a break. Even forgot to smoke. When he felt in his pocket for the matches, his fingers encountered the newspaper *Kolkhoz Life*, with a photograph of Veronica and above it: "Stories About Leading Workers". And right at the bottom, at the very end, "Ion Lefter".

Filutsa flung away his cigarette and got back to work. His hands moved mechanically while for the hundredth time he mentally repeated that article. What did it not say: that he, Filutsa, had a big family of children and liked to pray before the icon for three hours at a time. The children could not hold out to the end of these long prayers. The little ones up on the stove started to fool about and Filutsa, breaking off short, would come at them with his belt. Then it would begin all over again. "Forgive me, Lord God, for unfastening my trousers before Thee and taking Thy name in vain! With these little devils a man can't even say his prayers in peace!" Then, remembering that he had named the devil in front of the icons he would start again from the beginning. The children would lose all patience and begin pinching one another and whining: "Ma, I'm hungry!" Filutsa would fly into a fresh rage and again take off his belt. "Quiet, you little devils!" Then he caught himself up, clapped his hand to his mouth, cursed and started mumbling everything again from the beginning, and so on, until it led to a quarrel with his wife. And if they quarrelled, they wouldn't speak to one another for three or four months at least. The wife ate apart with the children, while Filutsa cooked something for himself on the hearth, ate somewhere in the entry to avoid seeing the "little devils". He would take from Veronica the key to the cellar, the pantry where the flour was kept, and did not speak to his wife as long as his anger lasted. He did not speak to the children, either. Weeding, his wife and the children worked

at one end, he at the other. Filutsa always worked facing the valley, because we have a great many hills our way.... In 'forty-nine, when we all applied to join the kolkhoz, he would hear nothing of it. But kolkhozes were formed all the same, and seeing that now there was no law to keep his wife in order, he realised there was nothing to be done and joined. True, he's a fine craftsman, his hands are "golden bracelets", as the saying goes. But to make up, his throat is a "silver funnel". But on a big farm, skilled men are needed.

So the article went.

"Who d'you think you are? Listen, who are you to need my craftsmanship? Why d'you have to get after me, what put it into your head?" Filutsa knew by heart every word written about him by his cousin.

He was particularly incensed by Ion's jokes. A fine thing, indeed! Hands — golden bracelets! Throat — a silver funnel! He'd done it on purpose all right, to make the whole district roll with laughter. But it wasn't true. It wasn't often people saw him drunk under a fence.

The barrel was ready. Filutsa removed the boxes and gave the barrel a kick. This had been his test for a barrel ever since the article had appeared in the paper. The barrel rolled but it was strongly put together and did not come apart, even though it still had no proper hoops.

Ion found an explanation for this. He once told the coopers that if a barrel could roll without hoops and did not fall apart, it was constructed with skill and anger.

The barrel rolled right to the press. Some voices sounded — the voices of rattlepates:

"Good for him!"

"Filled his quota for today, too."

"He promised it before the radio stopped —"

"Kept his word, no getting away from it."

"Ion, fill a jug, treat your cousin."

"Where's Hare got to, where's he vanished?"

The newspaper writer Ion appeared from behind the press. Filutsa fixed the hoops on the barrel and started hammering them angrily.

"The rest of the job's yours," said Filutsa. "Scald it with boiling water and soda and find it a place in the cellar. I shan't interfere."

"Why are you walking so slowly, Ion?"

"He's making up a new article. Let him alone."

All the master coopers were on Filutsa's side. Mitrutsa once said for all to hear that if a man wanted to crack jokes, he could do it in the wall newspaper, keep it among themselves. Why have all the villages round about reading it?

"In these villages everyone's got relatives of his own or his wife's. How'll you go to them on a holiday, for instance, after Hare's made a fool of you in the paper?"

The other men said nothing but it was plain they were on Filutsa's side. Only one old man, Grandad Trifan, apparently liked to feed the wolf and spare the goat.

"Every man to his own awl. There's Filutsa makes barrels, smooth as an egg. And Ion writes fine. And what can he write about? Now, I won't say every word of it's gospel truth, but when you read it you roll over laughing."

Filutsa shot a sidelong look at the old man, brought the jug up to his mouth and emptied it at a draught. Then he pulled his cap down over his eyes and went off home.

At another time he would have found words to answer his cousin and the old man. But when there's a lot of folks round, he reasoned, you have to laugh too willy-nilly, or they'll be laughing at you all the more, they'll say you can't take a joke, or criticism as they call it these days.

All the same I gave him one back, too: "Hare with horse's

hoofs." I wonder if he got it. Of course he did, he's no fool! A lightweight, but not a fool. And about the silken sieve — that was good, too! It was foolish of me not to talk to him for a fortnight.... But he touched Veronica, too, the rascal. Carries a ten-gram glass in her pocket and if anyone asks her, "Try our wine, Comrade Chairman," takes out that thimble — lab glass, as he called it in his paper. He's a devil, that Ion, he sees everything. Oh, he isn't a fool, that's true — only a lightweight. If he wasn't, he'd leave me in peace.

The lamps on their posts swayed in the autumn fog. The walnut trees on the hillside had shed their leaves, scattering them over the roads and paths.

"And after all, what he wrote was all before the kolkhoz."

...The lights were on in Filutsa's house. Veronica was preparing supper and waiting. She must be tired, he thought. The whole day long at the grape picking, and with the tractors out where they'll be sowing wheat. She's got plenty on her hands. Especially in the autumn.

Filutsa passed the two-wheeled cart. The horse was feeding and never even raised his head to give the usual greeting to his master. Must be hungry. He rubbed the animal's mane and went on.

After all — well, he wrote in the paper. What of it? I'm none the worse for it. Not lost a gram.

Filutsa's face cleared, and he entered the door with a firm step.

"No, Cousin Ion! Today I'm going to sleep with my face to my wife! Not spoken for a fortnight — that's enough! I'm through!"

ION DRUTSE

*Let's Talk About the Weather**

It was about three in the morning when she arrived. She wanted to slip in quietly but the door was locked. She went to the window, tapped, tapped again but nobody answered. She waited a little while and then called in the voice of an injured child.

"Father!"

It was queer — in all the four years she had come to her parents for visits she had never once had to knock. Her father was always waiting. He slept very lightly — like a dog, with one eye open. He always knew the sound when she opened the small gate, the sound of her footsteps; whatever time it might be when she arrived the door was always open, and he stood on the threshold, smiling into the darkness, ready with the same old joke: "Did you find the way yourself, or did you have to ask?"

The girl tapped again, called again, but could not rouse Ikim. Anica, his wife, called him through the darkness.

"Ikim! Ikim!"

Silence. Anica, disturbed, jumped out of bed and went to the trestle bed in the corner where Ikim had gone to bed. He was lying on his back with eyes open, slowly chewing the blade of grass he had brought that evening when he came back from the quarry.

"Don't you hear, Ikim?"

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* © Translation into English. Progress Publishers 1976

The blade swayed thoughtfully but Ikim seemed to hear nothing. Anica sighed, then went out and opened the door. A girl's tired breathing and the delicacy of perfume filled the room. The two big suitcases she had taken when she left fought the table and chairs in the darkness. In two words the girl spoke out all her gladness, her trouble, her hope.

"Good evening."

Only her mother answered: "Good evening."

For some time both were silent, glancing apprehensively at the corner where Ikim lay chewing his blade of grass. The silence lasted a long time, until it became unbearable. With a sob the girl picked up her suitcases and turned towards the door again but this was too much for poor Anica. She spoke, in a warm, encouraging voice:

"Go into the other room and lie down. I'll take those cases."

The trestle bed creaked, but they pushed boldly through the darkness, passed safely and vanished into the next room. They whispered in the darkness.

"You won't be cold with just one blanket?"

"No."

"Will you have two pillows or one?"

"One."

The girl slipped into bed. Anica tiptoed back to the first room and stopped beside her bed. After half an hour, when she could hear the quiet breathing of a person asleep after a hard journey, Anica spoke in a whisper.

"Ikim!"

She waited a long time for an answer, but waited in vain. Then she too went to bed.

"It'll all pass over and be forgotten, Ikim," she said pacifically, as though ending a long unpleasant talk.

She spoke warmly, reassuringly, but all the same she lay

open-eyed till morning, sharing her husband's hard, bitter vigil. She heard her daughter sleeping, heard the trestle bed creak and prayed for the day to come, because in the daylight thoughts are brighter and people become kinder.

At dawn Ikim rose and went out. He spat out the remains of his grass on the threshold. It was Sunday, he had nothing in particular to do, but he was used to going out at daybreak. In the early mornings he was apt to get hard fits of coughing and he preferred to take them outside, so as not to waken his family.

He sat down on a big rock under the pear-tree which served as a bench. Stoically he endured the harsh coughing of a habitual smoker, then lit up defiantly. Tall, with a big, craggy forehead that looked as though it had been hewn with an axe, he sat there smoking silently until the sun rose. He watched how it rose and where, and reckoned how far he would have to go that day. He trod out his cigarette end, settled himself more comfortably, dropped his head and waited. The main hostile forces would come from two directions, and now and then Ikim cast glances at the house and at the wicket gate.

Although his daughter had arrived at the dead of night, by some miracle the news had flown through the village and before the dew had dried Ikim's wicket gate creaked. A woman's cheerful voice, the kind you might think was bringing joy and happiness to the house, rang through the whole yard and the neighbours' yards too.

"What are you doing, Ikim?"

A stout, sturdy woman with ruddy cheeks advanced aggressively on him, apparently ready to wrest from him at all costs an answer to that most ordinary question — what he was doing.

"Sitting here — can't you see!"

"I'll sit with you a bit."

Ikim reluctantly moved to make a place for her, and half the rock vanished under her wide flowered skirt. Ioana was cousin to a good half of the village. This cheerful, smiling woman was very fond of all her relatives, but visited them only when something unpleasant had happened to them. The last time she had come to Ikim was ten years previously, when a soot-choked chimney had almost set the house on fire, and now here she was again. She sat smiling amiably, her eyes travelling over the whole yard and everything in it. Not everything pleased her or won her approval, but Ikim was a relative, so she spoke in a whisper as though about something known to the two of them alone.

"They say she's left college?"

Ikim was a patient man. Ten years of work in the quarries, of breaking up great blocks and preparing stone for the kolkhoz, had increased his patience. He could sink for hours into deep silence and was accustomed to taking life as it came. But his smiling cousin's whisper was a bit too much. His heavy craggy forehead crimsoned. He replied in a deliberately loud voice, smashing the offered intimacy.

"Yes, they say she's left...."

After a silence, Ioana decided to repair the first bit of foolishness by a second.

"There's a daft girl for you! Another two years and she'd have been a doctor, but no.... What'll you do with her now?"

"Tell my wife to fix her a meal."

"Well, that of course, naturally...."

Anica, busy in the house, caught something about eating and hurried to bring out a full plate of cheese and potato buns, still warm. She knew very well when Ikim had an appetite and when he had none, but now he had gone too long. She put down the plate by the stone slab.

"Did you make those for me?" Ioana asked, smiling. But Anica was a truthful woman.

"I couldn't say I made them for you especially, but if you like them —"

"Well, we can eat them, why not."

Ikim did not pay any attention to the buns or hear Ioana praising them. He went on sitting with hanging head, casting sidelong glances at the door and the gate, angry that his daughter was in no hurry to get up. It was Sunday, the sun was high, he had a great many relatives in the village all eager to come and hear him deal with his daughter.

"Father! It seems —"

Straight through the orchard, the dew-wet grass soaking his trousers to the knees, came his son Mikhutse — briskly, emitting the smell of horse sweat over a wide radius. He had been a stableman since he was fourteen and was drenched with that smell. However, it did not trouble him. Mikhutse had a houseful of children and debts over the whole village but he was never downcast. Every year the number of children increased and so did the debts, but his spirits were always high.

"It seems, father, you've visitors and couldn't give a shout to your own son to join you in a glass."

As Ikim's sense of humour was definitely absent that morning, Ioana came to the rescue.

"He knew you'd come anyway."

"Sure thing, if there's guests."

Mikhutse sat down on the grass to let the sun dry his trousers a bit.

"How are all your children, Mikhutse?" Ioana enquired.

"How many are there, anyway?"

"Heaven alone knows — either seven or eight. You ought to ask my wife, she's the one who keeps count."

"And your debts?" Ioana was not to be quenched.

"Oh, all right," Mikhutse said casually. "If the kolkhoz gives me two bonuses in a row there won't be any. The important thing is, two at once."

They talked for some time of this and that, but Ikim said not a word — he probably did not even listen to what they were talking about. He sat there with hanging head, glancing now at the gate, now at the house, with an occasional look at the orchard, too. He had built houses for all his children close by and they came to him straight through the orchard, each following his own path. Mikhutse had already come along his, two more were left. And sure enough, voices came from the depth of the orchard, behind the tall walnut trees.

"Where are you going? To father's?"

"Yes."

"Wait a moment, I'll go too."

Two of his daughters were hurrying towards the stone slab. The elder, Marina, had a boy of three by the hand, the favourite of the returned student. The other, Zina, short and dark, walked with a smooth speed as though floating through the orchard, and cast uneasy looks at her father's house — she hated being involved in any kind of trouble and did everything possible to avoid it. She was probably apprehensive that a quarrel might be going on already, so she came up quickly with a greeting, then sat down beside the plate of buns and started eating.

"The number of years I've been married, and I still like Mum's cooking best of all. I mean it."

Ioana met that, too, with her smile.

"Never mind. You'll forget it."

"I doubt it."

Marina approached with her son. The boy was dressed neatly, even with elegance — his father was a salesman

in the village shop; Ioana, of course, had to take notice.

"How much did you pay for this suit?"

The boy sniffled and eyed the plate; Ikim silently took a bun, broke it in half and gave one piece to the boy, the other to Marina. The boy silently began eating but Marina refused and put her half back.

In all this Ioana found a good pretext for more talk.

"Poor father! One asks and he hasn't got it, another doesn't want what's offered."

Mikhutse saw no particular misfortune in that.

"Nothing so bad there. The old man's got plenty. Those stones, it's heavy work handling them, but they bring in the money."

"Why don't you go and work there yourself?" asked Marina.

"I can't stand explosions. My eyes screw tight when I hear one."

They say you can know when a fine day's coming by the sunrise, but this is not always the case. Although dawn and sunrise had been clear and bright, a strong wind rose suddenly, drove up great dark clouds and massed them over the village in a solid grey-black menace. The very look of it brought a chill. Mikhutse hugged his wet knees, Zina drew her shawl round her shoulders, Marina found a sheltered spot and only Ikim sat without moving, head down, as though all the ominous celestial movement had nothing to do with him.

Anica ran across to a neighbour and returned carrying a mirror — these neighbours had got used to her mirror, they had had it for five years already.

All were silent, giving the girl time to wash, then a little longer while she plaited her hair. It was high time for her to

come out but she still did not appear and they still remained silent under the pear-tree. People passed along the lane — for some reason everybody seemed to have business that took them this way, including those who as a rule never used it. They even paused by Ikim's gate for a polite "good morning". And those incessant goodmornings carried an intonation: "Well, what are you going to do now, Ikim? Fed and reared a family like that and now here's the youngest lets you down."

It was Ioana who answered them all. Her cheerful, smiling greeting carried the undertone: "You needn't worry about us, you mind your business, and we'll manage ours. See how many we are!" After each answer she glanced at Ikim, highly pleased with herself, as though giving him to understand: there, you see how I'm helping you out? But Ikim paid no attention to her help or herself.

"Good morning!"

Slender and lovely, in a pretty blouse of fine woollen material and high-heeled shoes, the daughter came forward lightly, as though it meant nothing to her to come or go wherever she wished. Anica followed, hardly breathing for a surging tumult of gladness, grief and fear, her eyes pleading for kindness to this girl because any hurt done would strike her, Anica, doubly hard and she was already old, she had lived her day and it was wrong to hurt her.

The elder sisters and even Ioana herself had admiring eyes for the student. Ikim still did not raise his head but answered loudly for all.

"Good morning."

Then he straightened with a grim look. Oh yes, she was good-looking. Here in the village, with so much work and cares, so much sun and rain, she would never have grown to be so beautiful.

"Anica, bring her a chair."

The girl sat down on the edge of it, looked hesitantly at his red, craggy forehead and all the courage she had mustered with such difficulty evaporated in an instant. Sandutse, her favourite, came and leaned against her, whispering something, but she heard nothing. She lowered her head and sat stroking the boy's hair.

Ikim started to thrust his huge hands into his pockets, but either the hands were too big or the pockets too small — they would not go completely in. He was angry with his hands, with his pockets; all eyes were drawn to his movements, all watched to see how it would end. Ikim had strange, ugly hands, big and hairy, with scars and bruises old and new, and nails growing in all directions — in a word, the hands of an old quarryman, and the whole village found an unspoken pleasure in looking at them. Ikim heartily disliked this curiosity and tried to hide them; whenever too many people were about, his first effort was to tuck his hands away somewhere. Now he got them half-way into his pockets but then thought better of it, pulled them out and laid them on his knees — let them rest and warm their bruises in the sunshine.

Yes, there they were, the battered, toil-roughened hands of Ikim Vacaru. What if they were far from beautiful? It was these hands, these, that had fed and reared a big family. How many roads, how many schools, how many houses had been built with the stones broken out of the quarry by these hands, yes, and even this fine young lady with her smart blouse and high-heeled shoes had been reared by them, they had paid for everything with their blood, their sweat, their many scars and bruises.

"Poor father...."

Mikhutse was sincerely touched. He wanted to say

something about the quiet heroism of parents, but Ikim shot a look from under his brows and Mikhutse was silent — for a long time.

The wind dropped and a huge grey-black cloud sank lower over the village, it looked ready to break right on the roofs any minute.

So they sat there quietly, uncomfortably, with never a word spoken.

At last Marina could stand it no longer.

"Well, father, what do you say now?" she asked.

Anica's faded eyes became fixed. The girl in the smart blouse began quickly stroking Sandutse's head as though she were afraid he would burst out crying. Some passers-by called a good morning but nobody answered. Suddenly Ikim raised his head and shot out a piercing look at somebody.

"What's there for me to say?" he asked angrily.

Poor Zina who could not stand quarrels made a desperate effort to save the situation.

"What do you think, father — is it going to rain?" she pattered, quickly.

For a moment that interested everyone, apparently they all desperately needed to know whether it would rain or not, and Ikim was the one man who was able to decide the future of the weather. Only he could decide whether there should be rain or not.

"There will be rain," said Ikim.

That pleased nobody, but Ikim spoke with such assurance that none of them tried to demur.

Silence again. Marina suddenly let out a sigh.

"When the weather changes I get dreadful pains in my legs. All this summer they've tormented me, you may not believe it but I swear I've gone about a cripple."

"Rub them with spirit," Ikim advised. "It'll help."

Marina laughed wryly.

"Father, I've burned my skin off with it, and no good of it all."

Anica sighed heavily — after all, Marina was her daughter. "Poor girl!"

Ioana slid off the stone slab, went up to Marina, felt her legs, and spoke solely for Ikim's benefit:

"She's got dreadful rheumatism."

Ikim seemed not to hear, but after some time he spoke:

"She won't die of it."

Zina, who had taken no part in the talk about her sister's rheumatism, suddenly remembered something.

"Father, do give over with your rain! My Andrei's started re-roofing the shed. What'll he do if there's a downpour?"

Poor Anica tried to come to her rescue.

"Ikim, they've got to get that shed roofed."

Ioana put in her word:

"If it rains, the shed'll fall down."

"There's going to be rain," said Ikim. Then after a moment's silence he advised his daughter, "Tell Andrei not to open up the whole shed. He can do first one side, then the other."

"Well, we've got enough sense for that ourselves," said Zina, disappointed. "I thought maybe there wouldn't be any rain at all."

"There's going to be rain," said Ikim.

Silence. The two elder daughters sat feeling injured, and Sandutse too felt injured — nobody was taking any notice of him and he didn't know what he had done wrong. All three sisters started casting stolen glances at Mikhutse — what sort of brother was he, to let his sisters down? He lighted a cigarette, rolled up his wet trousers and plunged boldly into the fight.

"But father, what if there's a storm instead of rain? Who wants that — me, or you, or the kolkhoz for that matter?"

"All the kolkhoz orchards'll be ruined," said Ioana with conviction.

Anica's cares were more modest. She looked apprehensively at her orchard.

"Ikim, we've got young saplings. You planted them yourself, and watered them...."

Ikim rose silently and went to the orchard. There was a general sigh of relief — at last he had moved. They watched him busying himself round the saplings: they were weak and sorry-looking, the leaves were few, the branches were few and even the soil seemed somehow too scanty for them.

Ikim returned dourly. His craggy forehead looked earthen-grey. He sat down on the stone slab and repeated shortly, "There's going to be rain."

"And if a storm comes?" Mikhutse asked boldly.

"Let it come," Ikim answered implacably.

In this moment he had become a stranger to them, they were sorry for him and afraid of him. Ikim himself probably felt that he stood alone and perhaps in order to bring back his family, or perhaps from a simple love of the truth, he said, "You think the orchards don't need storms? They do."

"But what for?" Mikhutse enquired.

Ikim smiled and to the great surprise of all, spoke in a quiet, affectionate voice.

"A storm is needed to test the orchard: it bends the trees and tries to drag each one of them out of the ground. The strong ones it cannot harm but the weak ones break. Why worry about them? Who wants them, those weak trees? Better set out better, stronger ones in their place. That's how it is."

For the first time that day Ioana did not smile. She crossed herself as she spoke piteously.

"How cruel, Lord God in Heaven, cruel!"

"He's too old," said Marina.

"He hasn't slept three nights," Anica excused him.

"He's had concussion twice," Zina recalled for some reason best known to herself.

Only Mikhutse waited a long time before expressing any opinion. Then he sighed.

"It's the plain truth, sisters."

"You want a storm, too?"

"Yes."

He rose. This was what he had felt about things for a long time, only he had not been able to express it. Now the idea had acquired life, it had bones, flesh and heart. Mikhutse walked slowly along his own path carrying this great thought like a small child, and in carrying children he was adept — he had a whole houseful of them....

Ioana too left, whispering softly, crossing herself, her wide flowered skirt sweeping the grass. She said no goodbyes, nor did the others.

The sisters tried their own efforts at drawing Ikim into talk about the weather, but it was no good. The talk was ended, he pulled another blade of grass and began slowly chewing it, and the sisters left. Sandutse followed his mother, holding a piece of bun high over his head.

Now the three of them were alone — father, mother and daughter. Why they sat there was hard to say because everything had been said, everything decided. Suddenly Sandutse came running back from the orchard, threw down the uneaten piece of bun and was about to run away again when Ikim called him imperiously. The boy returned hesitantly.

"Why did you throw down that piece?"

"I don't want any more."

"If you don't want it you could have laid it down properly. Why throw bread onto the ground?"

Ikim rose, went up to the boy, took down his pants, picked up a twig and gave him a few sharp cuts. The girl in the smart blouse shuddered. Anica jumped up to save her grandson but he was already running through the orchard, holding up his pants with one hand, rubbing away a torrent of tears with the other.

Ikim sat down on the slab again — wearily, as though it had cost him enormous effort to strike those blows with the twig, and wiped the sweat from his forehead.

The girl spoke softly.

"Father...."

Ikim looked at her in surprise — just what could she want to say? His look was so stonily heavy and dour that she could not utter another word. Her father sat for a little while longer, then rose and went towards the house, still chewing his blade of grass.

Alone with her daughter, Anica said, appalled, "What have you done, my daughter?"

The girl broke into tears. Anica started to cry too. For a long time they sat by the stone slab sobbing quietly. Then Anica straightened herself decidedly.

"That's enough crying. Come with me."

After all, she was his wife. Her whole life had been lived beside him. She had seen enough of his chewing of grasses. She entered resolutely and spoke with all the anger and authority of which she was capable.

"Listen, Ikim...."

He was lying on the bed with closed eyes and the blade of grass slept on his chest. They went outside quietly, sat down

in a corner of the orchard where nobody could see them and whispered together nearly until evening. When the sun began to sink, Anica tiptoed into the house, picked up the two suitcases and just as quietly tiptoed out again. In the yard she opened one of them, put the remaining cheese and potato buns into it and then went to see her daughter off. She returned late, stumbling and constantly wiping tear-stained eyes.

Very well, you will say, but what about the rain? Did it fall or not? And was there just rain, or a storm?

It is of no significance. There could be rain or there could be none. There could even be a storm — or there could be none. That is always the way — it rains, it clears up again and there is fine weather, and then, all of a sudden, it rains again.

Although — if it comes to that, we must be fair to Ikim: after a week it did rain. The rain came towards morning, barely touching part of the village, and in the afternoon Ikim got a note saying that his daughter had taken her exams and was studying at college again.

In the late autumn she came for a visit, again at night. She brought only one small suitcase. She left it by the door and went to the window, but had no time to tap. She was just raising her hand when the door creaked. Ikim stood on the threshold, smiling at her through the darkness, and she heard his dear old joke:

"Did you find the way yourself, or did you have to ask?"

*A Real Paduraru**

Just what would you call a big village? Are five hundred houses enough for you? Well, if that is the case, then Cumpana Veche is really big, because it has a thousand and more. Exactly how much that "more" is only the Good Lord

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* © *Soviet Literature*

could say. Four village Soviet secretaries have turned grey trying to sort it out, and now a fifth is going the same way, although he's still quite young.

The point is that Cumpana folks are the energetic sort. Hardly a day passes without somebody leaving and somebody arriving. Hardly a day passes without a cottage collapsing with age at one end of the village, and a new house smiling with its shining windows at the other.

Add to this, Cumpana folks do love a joke. Say, a census is being taken. Some, avid for fame, sign two or three times while others avoid signing at all, just to see how long it will be before they are missed. This sort of thing is easy enough, because a good half have the same surname — Paduraru. There are four Ivan Ivanovich Padurarus. In the two schools a good third of the teaching staff and over half the pupils are Padurarus — the class books have two or three pages for the letter "P".

They say that three hundred years ago there was only one Paduraru, and the present crowd are all his descendants. This is hard to credit today, because although there are plenty clearly related, others are not related at all.

Still, it is quite possible that they do all come from a common root, because all without exception have the same clear, ringing, melodious voices, and if several Padurarus gather together, you can be sure there will be singing sooner or later. And then, perhaps, for the first time in your life you will be dissatisfied with your own name — after all, you too could have been born a Paduraru!

The village choir consists exclusively of Padurarus. Spiteful tongues have been known to whisper that there's nothing surprising about that — the leader of the choir, too, is Paduraru. These fine voices have won the village considerable fame, but to be quite truthful, they can also

cause a good deal of bother. If some Paduraru mounts the rostrum at a meeting, he'll go on talking till he's tired, for no ordinary voice can break through to cut him short. The Padurarus are very united when it is a question of this talent they possess and never let one another down. But if two Paduraru women quarrel there is nothing for the gossips to whisper about, the village knows the whole story from start to finish.

So far, all right; but as we have said, Cumpana is a really big village and half the people in it are Padurarus. Hardly a day passes without the appearance of a new little Paduraru, while now and then the oldest die off. And then — the lamentations of the women at the funeral! Those laments are enough to bring a choke to your own throat; you may have no idea even of who is being buried, but you feel as bad as though it were your own best friend.

And this is only the half of it. These women are always ready with their lamentations. Any pretext suffices. When a nephew leaves for his army service the send-off is accompanied by a whole ritual of it. If a calf has got lost in the woods, if a woman has quarrelled with her husband about her mother-in-law or with her mother-in-law about her husband — again voices are lifted. And if one remembers that Cumpana is a big village and half its people are Padurarus, and if one remembers the kind of voices they possess —!

It is true, the Paduraru womenfolk enjoy the vocalisation of others too. They will stand quietly, listening from beginning to end, and then as connoisseurs analyse what they have heard from the literary, musical and artistic standpoints. For the men it is worse. Men always find tears hard to stand, and Paduraru laments flow down in a river of tears.

It is particularly hard on the local intellectuals. Although actually, each one has his own approach to the question of laments. The secondary school headmaster, for instance, who specialises in history, approaches them from the historical aspect and this scientific attitude helps him to maintain his equilibrium. The local doctor, who among other things is a collector of folklore, welcomes each new lament as a page in a thick MS briefly entitled "Wisdom". As for the kolkhoz chairman, a young agronomist by the name of — yes! — Paduraru, he has not yet determined his attitude to laments. They simply make his throat contract spasmodically. But after all, he reasons, people are human, and if something happens you must just let them pour out their emotion in whatever way they wish.

Naturally, the Paduraru women themselves all have their own particular style in laments. Some lament in rhyme, others in prose. The more gifted ones improvise, others make skilful use of remembered versions. Sometimes there are compilations, and there were even undoubted cases of plagiarism.

Some old Paduraru women, real experts, jealously dispute priority. To be sure, this concerns only the second place, the first has indisputably belonged for a dozen years to Ileana Paduraru, a small-built widow with beautiful black eyes. The strange thing about it is that her laments have been heard in the village only two or three times in all her life. The last time was three years ago, at the funeral of her husband who died after a serious operation. Her lament was short — lasting only for the time it took to carry the coffin, but in the history of the village that day was remembered as the most mournful since the invasion of the Huns.

The young chairman was fortunate, he was still a student then and never heard that famous lament. It would have

been hard for him to endure; even retold briefly it brought such a choking spasm in his throat that he tended to avoid the widow and, to be quite honest, felt somewhat afraid of her.

Ileana was a quiet, modest woman, a hard worker — when her workday units were reckoned up in the autumn, it always turned out she had earned as much as the team leader. Her three children were always neat and clean; the eldest, in the second form at school, even tried hard to get all-round "excellent" marks, which won him great disfavour with the other Paduraru boys.

Ileana's little house at the very end of the village was small and cosy, thatched with rusty straw. True, they spent little time in it, the old padlock always seemed to be hanging on the door, basking in the sunshine. Ileana worked in the fields from early till late, the children were at school and nursery school. Towards evening the children would make their way home, silently, hand in hand. Then Ileana came, the windows glowed, smoke rose from the chimney; but in the morning the old padlock would hang there again, waiting for the sun to come and warm it.

One summer, at the very hottest time, that house caught fire, nobody knew how or why. Ileana, of course, was away. When neighbours came running they found only charred walls and warm ash. Grandad Nikita, the oldest Paduraru in the village, picked up the hot padlock, drove it into the ground with his heel to cool and sighed:

"Now we'll hear a lament to remember!"

The chairman came at once. True, the car drove very slowly down the lane, ready to turn back at any moment. Ileana had not yet arrived. But the house itself looked so wretched, its smoke-blackened walls so desolate, that the chairman's throat was already tight. He smoked a cigarette

with long pulls, drank a glass of water brought by a neighbour, and lighted another cigarette. He asked where Ileana was working. She was at a neighbouring kolkhoz winnowing seed acquired by exchange. Then the chairman took the oldest Paduraru into the car and they went to seek her. What they talked about along the road is not known, but they certainly had no time for very much talk because the neighbouring kolkhoz was close and the road level.

When they reached the granary Grandad Nikita, much agitated, left the car while the chairman squatted down by a pile of seed and let the grains trickle slowly through his fingers as though counting them. Ileana had just spread a clean cloth on the grass and was preparing to eat. When she saw them she froze, her eyes fixed on Nikita. And the oldest Paduraru boldly approached.

"Listen, Ileana...."

Poor woman — her eyes were stony, imploring protection.... She whispered faintly, "Grandad Nikita...."

But the old Paduraru — they had known what they were doing when they sent him — flushed purple and shouted at her as though she were his daughter.

"Now then, no nonsense! Don't try it on with me!" The black eyes quivered.

"Grandad Niki —"

"Listen, silly woman.... Your house is burned down. Only just now —" here he had to pause, the young chairman choked, and Ileana was already wringing her hands. "Quiet, silly woman! The chairman says that tomorrow when you return you'll see a house the like of which neither your grandfather nor your great-grandfather ever dreamed of.... Only hush your noise! The children'll sleep at the nursery school.... Only none of that — that —!"

The young chairman looked at Ileana imploringly: if you can — if you only can — I give my word....

Poor Ileana.... She clenched her teeth, her work-worn hands tightened into fists like stones and a torrent of tears poured down her dark face, dripped from her chin onto her knees and spread in two wet patches on her gingham skirt.

Old Paduraru took off his hat and wiped his forehead with a sigh of relief.

"That's all right, Comrade Chairman. If there's tears, she won't wail. So now let's go and get the house built."

Built it was. All the Padurarus gathered and worked until evening, then they worked through the night, and in the morning work seethed again. They pulled down the scorched walls and took them to a gully outside the village. In the back part of the yard, under an old walnut tree, a new house rose. They roofed it with tiles so it would never catch fire again. They planked the floors in all three rooms and the kitchen, they put in new doors and windows, and even painted them light green as they had been in the old house.

On the evening of the second day only old Paduraru was left in the yard, putting locks on the new doors. Everybody else waited on the road. Somewhat aside stood the doctor, deep in thought, perhaps regretting the loss of what might well have been the finest page of his "Wisdom".

There was a sudden silence. A short, thin woman appeared at the end of the street, followed by three children holding hands. They were walking slowly, then they ran, then came forward slowly again, barely moving their feet. At the gate all four halted. The widow's arms rose to the sky, — now it would start! — but then they fell onto the children's shoulders, tears poured down and her lips trembled. And again that oldest Paduraru crimsoned and shouted as though she were his daughter:

"Now then, no foolishness! Don't try it with me! Better go in and take a look at the house, naught left to do but the putty and whitewash."

Easy to say "go in". But an old, grey-headed Paduraru woman left the crowd and went up to Ileana.

"Yes, let's go inside and look at it."

The crowd silently rolled in after them.

The house first pleased the grey-headed woman, then it pleased the children. The eldest even wrote "Paduraru" on the fresh paint with a stub of pencil and got well scolded for it by the old Paduraru woman. But the youngest, whether from excitement or because he had been forgotten, suddenly let a trickle down from his pants onto the floor, for which the grey-headed woman actually praised him.

The house really was excellent. In the attic there was a sack of flour and new beds stood in the rooms.

Gradually the people dispersed.

Darkness fell and the windows of the new house were bright. Ileana put the children to bed. But — strange! — the windows remained bright for a long time, until far past midnight. And it must be admitted that the whole village found sleep difficult that night. Sly tongues whispered that all the same, Ileana would surely lift her voice.

But Ileana's voice was not heard, not on the first night, or the second, or the third. She did, however, go about wearily with a kind of melancholy, and seemed unable to set her mind or her hands to anything.

The fourth day was Sunday. Ileana asked one of her aunts to look after the children and went into the forest for mushrooms. There had been warm rain recently, the forest should be full of them. A few neighbours wanted to go with her, but for some reason she was in a great hurry to be off.

In spite of the warm rain, mushrooms appeared to be few; at any rate, Ileana returned in the evening with a bare dozen in her basket. True, sly tongues whispered that mushrooms or no mushrooms, round about midday a woman had been wailing some where far, far away — such wailing, such lamentation that blood froze in your veins....

Of course, malicious tongues will always find something to say and there is no need to believe it all. But still, there was one suspicious fact — from that Sunday Ileana seemed to be avoiding the young chairman. If she did happen to meet him she would pass quickly, head down. This happened a number of times until at last the chairman stopped her.

"Ileana, what's the matter — why do you look so unhappy?"

Ileana raised her head, her lashes quivered, then her eyes smiled.

"Do I seem sad, then?"

The young chairman smiled, too.

"I must have been mistaken."

"Of course you are."

She smiled goodbye at him and went her way. She walked quickly, her head up, and only the shadows of the acacias along the path flickered in her clear black eyes.

NICOLAE ESINENKU

*Sorrow**

He'd barely time to rub his eyes, and he started:

"What sorrow to be getting old...."

He sang it without emotion. Almost without any tune. Any who heard would know at once that he'd as much music in him as a corncrake.

But Gavrila cared nothing for all this. He kept right on.

He might be taking a drink of water from the well:

"What sorrow to be getting old...."

He might be watering the blue cornflowers under the window:

"What sorrow to be getting old...."

He might be painting bright strips along the earthen bank around the house:

"What sorrow to be getting old...."

"And what's this frightful sorrow he's got, I'd like to know," seethed Uncle Oca's widow, who had been left with two children to fend for. "Has he got children crying? Not one's the pixie got. A good house, and a full cellar — let him hold his tongue and thank God!"

But Gavrila kept right on.

Uncle Oca's widow had no time to scratch her head, as she herself said. When she was through with her work in the house she'd start the outdoor jobs. Those finished, she'd take a look in at the school — she couldn't let her lads be at the bottom of the class!

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One thing today, another tomorrow, the day after the same.

Yet one day Uncle Oca's widow, freshening the plaster on her house and marvelling to see how it was rejuvenated under her hands, suddenly found Gavrila's words on her tongue.

"What sorrow to be getting old...."

"Ugh! One of the devil's imps must have addled my wits," and she spat, to spit out the words. But in a moment or two they were back again. The words were like a spell laid on her. And they rose over the yard, more loudly, more dolefully:

"What sorrow to be getting old...."

*The Orange**

He had drawn and painted every day — yesterday, the day before, for weeks, for years on end — ever since they had bought him a paintbox. Always painting.

His family were thoroughly sick of his drawings and paintings. The cat drinking milk, the cat asleep, mum eating, mum at the TV set, mum reading, mum with a cigarette, dad in the kitchen, dad at the washing machine, dad at the sewing machine, dad with a shopping bag, sister at the mirror, sister in school, sister and mum, sister and the cat, sister, mum, mum, cat, cat, cat....

They were sick of it, and sent him from one to the other: show your sister, show your father, show your mother, show, show, show....

He did not mind. He showed them all, one after the other, and then started off again, drawing easily.

He looked at the cat. Looked at mum. Looked at sister. Looked at dad.

Soon the cat was ready. And so was mum. And so was sister. And so was dad.

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Again it was: show your sister, show your mother, show your father. Show....

He did not mind. He showed them all.

At last dad lost patience and told him to find something else to draw — the neighbour's daughter, for instance.

He did not mind. He was even pleased, it was a long time since he had seen her. He had forgotten her. How could he?

He took his paints, a new brush and paper and ran next door.

There was general surprise when he returned. On the paper an orange glowed.

*Nostalgia for the Sea, or the Miracle Hides Beyond the Hill**

It was father. I saw him when he was at the top of the hill. He came out of the flaming sun. I at once recognised his mighty shoulders, his strong hands; his own special way of walking — the step of a bull advancing to meet the toreador.

It was getting dark when he entered the yard. I dashed to meet him, arms open. He set me on his knee and with the keenest delight I started feeling in his pockets.

The left-hand pocket of his jacket held seashells. In the right were pebbles. His trouser pockets held sand.

When I took a better look at him I saw with wonder that his hair was seaweed, his lips coral, his eyelashes sealilies and his eyes drops of seawater.

When I looked still more closely I saw that his fingernails were fish scales and his buttons sea pebbles.

I had never seen father like this, but I felt he was magnificent and ran to my pals whose noses were thrust in through the cracks of our fence.

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Matei asked me to wake him and not forget. He would go. Tacke asked me to knock at his window and not forget. He would go. Marin asked me to call him, too. And be sure not to forget. He would go. Medeya said she would keep awake all night....

Morning found us at the top of the hill.

*When Father Doesn't Come So Long...**

They're coming home. You hear, mum?
They're coming home. Light the fire.
Mix dough. Put it in the pan. Set it in the oven. Lay the table and get wine.
They're coming home.

Mum stands holding the sieve. She listens.

Yes. They're coming home.

She lights the fire. Mixes dough. Puts the pastry in the pan. Slips it into the oven. Lays the table. Takes a jug and hurries down to the cellar.

By the cellar door she halts, surprised — what was that you said?

They're coming home.

She listens.

Yes. They are coming home.

She runs down the steps.

She puts the jug on the table. Goes to the oven. Takes out the bread. And a pot. Sets out three plates, three glasses on the table, and stops — what was that you said?

What did I say?

They're coming home.

Coming home?

Don't you hear?!

I listen hard.

Yes, they're coming home.

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I run into the entry, from there into the yard, from there to the road and tear off to the end of the village.

On the steppe all is quiet. Nobody.

That was the day Germany capitulated.

*To Whom the Sea Discloses Itself**

First he ran, and everything seemed to happen in an instant—he climbed a hill, crossed a valley, another hill and when he looked down—he saw nothing.

He returned.

He went back to his starting point and set out again. But this time at a walk.

Slowly he climbed the hill. Crossed the valley. And again climbed slowly.

From the hilltop he looked down and saw nothing.

He returned.

He went back to his starting point and set out again, but this time more slowly still.

He took ten steps and sat down.

He looked about him.

Good. Another ten steps. And again sat down. And again looked about him. Then another ten steps....

When he reached the hilltop there was still the valley to cross in the same slow way.

He crossed the valley and still had to climb the hill in the same way.

At last he reached the hilltop, crossed the valley, crawled up the second hill, but when he looked down from its top he again saw nothing.

He returned.

He went back to his starting point and set out again. But this time on hands and knees.

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When he reached the first hilltop his clothes were in rags.

When he had left the valley behind his elbows were bleeding.

When he reached the last height it was his heart that was bleeding.

But before him lav the sea — the great, blue, heaving sea.

*A Grain of Life**

Manutsa had heard that somewhere there was a life like heaven. A life full of melody. And she had heard, too, that there could be nobody who would not want such a life.

So when Dorel asked her to run away with to town and forget Nicu, Manutsa was quite ready.

"Only don't leave me alone among strangers, Dorel."

The train left in the afternoon, at four. Manutsa still had a little time to say goodbye to her friends.

"Good luck, Olga."

"Goodbye, Manutsa. Are you happy?"

"Oh, how can I know?!"

"I'd go too, but — Mitru isn't Dorel. He's never set foot farther than the club."

"But Nicu? What about Nicu, Manutsa?" asked Oleandra.

Nicu was not at home, but he saw everything from the hill where he was loading hay. Manutsa opened the door. Then in a few minutes she came out with a suitcase. (Just as she had once crossed his threshold to enter.) Now she hid the key under the earthen bank round the house, where they always put it, and came out onto the road....

Nicu's eyes followed her.

Manutsa looked just as she had a year ago when he had

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first seen her — slender and supple as a reed. She had come and warmed his bed and his heart.

But why had she come? What had caught her eye? Perhaps his wretched little cottage? Or his uniform covered with medals won fighting the Germans? Or his wooden leg which he threw under the bed at night? Who could say?

It was only when the road from the station to his door was solitary that Nicu opened his compressed lips.

"Manutsa! All the best to you. May you be happy, Manutsa!"

Strange things happen in this life. Perhaps it is because life is made up of grains — today you pick up a crumb here, tomorrow you pluck another scarp somewhere else, the day after in yet another place.... And so it goes, all the time.

Nicu too had plucked this and that. But he had no great cause for joy, because when the time came for him to study, hunger had flung a noose round his father's neck. And when he had barely collected his nineteen years, the war had decided that Nicu did not really need two legs and had taken one of them. The earth had taken his mother too. And now.... Now he had wished a good journey and happiness to someone else, Manutsa. He had sincerely wished that at least Manutsa, whose warmth he could still feel, should be happy, because she was still a fragment of himself. And wherever she might go now, part of him would go with her. Whatever she might do, he would be doing.

Heavens, and didn't he, Nicu, want to fly away too? But the wooden leg crushed the thought. And did he not want to show Manutsa the world? But — a bird with a broken wing?!

Today she had been taken away by that boy who had come to spend his holidays in Nicu's village. And Nicu had said

nothing. He knew that a bird cannot be tied down. And everyone must seek that which he lacks.

The village was like all villages. There was plenty of talk. Some said Manutsa had never wanted him, Nicu, he had forced her to come to his house after the war. Some said Nicu was just a dry stick beside the fire of Manutsa's youth.

Then, when the village had almost forgotten them, Manutsa returned.

"There's no paradise there at all," she said and collapsed sobbing on Nicu's shoulder.

Nicu stood, his arms hanging by his sides. He wanted to lift them to Manutsa's shaking shoulders, but they would not obey him.

VLAD IOVITSE

*When the Wine Laughs and Weeps**

His house stood on the edge of the deepest gully, and all paths from the village converged on it because each one who came knew that in the secret places of his heart the host held a few words for him alone.

Paths ran to his house from all sides. They might bring a young fellow whose eye had been caught by a maid and he could not wait to ask, "Now — tell me, Grandad, d'you like her?" They might bring two in fierce dispute who every morning exchanged punches over a fragment of land, and in the evening came to Grandad Capriani to make peace for them. They might bring a young wife to ask how much he thought she ought to ask for a calf at the market.

Then, too, there were some who came for no particular cause, just to chat and put knotty questions to the old man.

"Grandad Capriani, what do you say, why was the grain so poor this summer? There was plenty of rain and enough sunshine too."

"Better go to the schoolteacher, he knows more than me."

"E-e-eh, Grandad Capriani, I've forgotten more than he ever learned!" The young fellow laughed with a rattle like walnuts falling out of a rent sack.

The old man cast a sly glance at the lad as though looking for a place to strike a shrewd blow. And when the sharp lines

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rayed out round those penetrating eyes, the lad hastily gathered up his spilled walnuts.

"Well, and so you're saying there was enough rain and sunshine." the old man began, "yet still and all, the earth didn't bear a crop."

"Uhuh."

"And do you know, now, what the earth's made of?"

"Why, soil." The lad grinned.

"That's what you think. But in real truth, besides soil the earth's got stones, and coal, and iron, and other fine things. Only men have got at them and are fetching them out. So what happens? The earth gets empty inside and doesn't bear crops."

"You always find some way out, Grandad Capriani." The lad was not giving in. "Only there's this —"

"What?"

"In other parts maybe it's like that, but here, there's nothing to be got out but stones."

The old man dropped his eyes from the lad's face, red as an over-ripe tomato, to his considerable belly.

"The earth's just like one body," he went on. "Pierce it in one place, and the hurt goes all over."

The young fellow blinked in some confusion and held out his empty mug.

"There's another question, Grandad Capriani."

"Ask it."

"What music do you like best, when a violin sings, or a pipe doodles?"

"To me it makes no difference.... But you, it seems, find this music sweeter?"

"What music?"

"The music the wine sings when it flows from the jug into the mug."

There was nothing left for the young fellow but to tip out his rattling nuts again and surrender.

"Well, Grandad Capriani, you're one too many for me today, too."

The wine laughed with them in its rough earthenware jug as it poured cheerfully into the glasses, its foam rising over the edges, then gurgled and sang down strong throats.

But then one day its gold dimmed like the sky fearful of the storm. Men came to Capriani's courtyard, many of them, more than ever before. They all smoked, even those who had never held a cigarette between their lips. Here and there one tried to crack a joke, but then turned more sombre than before. They were awaiting a final word of Godspeed from the old man — one and only word, for all. But there was no such word in the secret places of his heart because faced with a catastrophe like this one which had descended so suddenly, Capriani felt himself as helpless as any. So the old man was silent. The wine spoke for him. It fell in ringing tears, foretelling suffering for each. From one guest to another the old man went, offering the full mug to each. He looked into their faces as though trying to discern with whom he would yet drink again, and with whom — never.

Several times the mug went the round of the guests. But there the men rose, leaving their battered playing cards on the grass. They praised the wine.

They left the yard and went without haste to the call-up office.

Only Capriani and his seven sons were left in the yard. They sat there, dark, slender, frowning. They did not crack jokes or distract themselves with cards. They listened to the whisper of the wine, and their thoughts were already travelling along the roads of war.

The jug was empty and the eldest of the sons rose. He

slung his pack over his shoulder. The others too rose. Only the youngest still remained seated. But his brothers looked at him and that was enough. The lad rose.

"We're going, father."

They embraced the old man. They looked at the pear-tree in front of the house. In all their lives they had never seen a pear-tree taller, with more spreading branches and a finer crop. They wished their father good health and strength like that of the pear-tree. Then they went to their wives. Fathers embraced their children and those who were not yet fathers looked at their brothers with affectionate envy, and kissed wives carrying beneath their hearts the throb of new life. Then they put away clinging hands and went to the gully. Only the youngest could not tear himself away from the arms of a slender, fair girl whom he had brought home only that spring. The brothers were already descending into the gully. The youngest could sense their impatience and unlinked the heavy clasp of woman's arms.

When the silhouettes of his sons rose from the gully and melted into the shimmering sunset distance, Grandad Capriani thought: if they were destined to return, they would return together.

His house stood on the edge of the deepest gully and now it felt lonely and bleak like an abandoned nest. The paths which had climbed peacefully to his wicket gate had tangled in the night and headed to the one great road.

The road, like all roads that summer, led to the front.

* * *

One day, when the autumn chill before dawn announced the coming end of the year, Grandad Capriani cut another notch in his Staff of Time, the seventieth. It meant that from

this moment on his step would be more unsure and his paths shorter. Even now they were not long — from the gate to the well, from the well to a neighbour, from one house to another. And so he went, till he came to his youngest daughter-in-law. And since he went to the youngest, he had to go round all the others, and the eldest too. But now, it seemed, he would have to walk alone round his yard or sit on the edge of the well and wait.... Wait for long hours, wait whole days, wait for weeks and months. Wait, because not one out of the seven had sent a letter. Not a single line. Neither to a wife, nor to him.

Vehicles passed constantly along the road — trucks, cars, tanks, motor-cycles. Blond, rosy Germans with sleeked-back hair drove past, singing gaily, laughing, and submachine-gun rounds rent the air.

These men had no time to remember their homes or those who were thinking of them, so far away. Sometimes Grandad Capriani badly wanted to ask if they had drunk a glass of red wine before leaving their homes. The wine must have smiled at them in farewell, thought the old man, if their gaiety bubbles over like this. And angrily he thought: mine must have caught the infection of this laughter, too, since they don't even write.

He looked for odd jobs about house and yard to give him at least some distraction from his thoughts. Sometimes he rolled a cigarette and threw a few words at the dog Gipsy.

When the sun was overhead and its heat warmed his bald head through a hole in his hat, the dog would bark three times. That meant it was dinner time.

"Today you'll have dinner alone, Gipsy."

The dog tail-wagged a "What about you?"

"I'll wait a bit."

He went out into the street, sat down on a block of wood and watched the soldiers, moving through the dusty murk, who carried away the weeks, months, years. They no longer sang, or fired off rounds into the air. Their clothes were not so clean and new, and their vehicles did not shine as they had.

Every now and then Gipsy reminded him that all the same he ought to eat a bite at least. But old Capriani was not accustomed to dining alone. It was his long-established custom never to sit down at table without company. He tried earnestly to observe this rule of his fathers, but it was not easy to find guests these days, although hunger was frequent in the houses. People avoided one another, hid from one another and nobody shared his troubles. For some time the old man had ceased to visit even his daughters-in-law, because he had no news for them. All seven sons were silent.

The days passed, one after the other, with the falling rains, the thawing snow, they flew away with withered leaves.

More notches appeared on the Staff of Time. These were notches of pain. They meant that the trembling legs could no longer serve the old man and now all his paths were inside the yard.

The Germans began to retreat. First the columns were thick, then they thinned out. One could cross the street without fearing to be knocked down by a motor-cycle or cursed by a horseman.

One evening, when Gipsy had barked three times, Grandad Capriani saw seven silhouettes on the road. These were not his sons, not even men from his village, but the number agitated him. He invited them in and treated them to whatever he had. He brought wine, too, which warmed them and cheered their hearts a little.

Seven. They stood before him. All mutilated, riddled with bullets, carrying in their eyes the death they had seen. But they were alive, they were on their way home. Strangers. But where were his? He asked them and their faces darkened. The cheerfulness vanished. After some minutes they rose and left.

* * *

Demobilised men began coming home to the village, in ones, twos and threes. But the seven did not come. It would have been too many returning to one house. The old man understood it. Now he would have been glad to see just a few, even one.

Then one morning, when he was sitting on the block, motionless as a crucifix, a man appeared on the road, or to be more exact, half a man. But even that half was not one of his sons.

With anguish Capriani recognised him. The half-man sitting on a board with four little wheels was Nani, the young fellow who had put sly questions. And the old man heard his laugh like the sound of walnuts falling from a rent sack.

When the laughter gave way to silence, tears showed in the soldier's eyes.

"Well, I'm back, Grandad Capriani. And as usual, I've got a question saved up for you."

"A tricky one?"

"A sad one, rather."

"Ask it."

"Why have they only cut me in half? Why couldn't they mince me into tiny pieces? And another: why didn't our marshal, or king, or his royal mother come to you with

questions when they cooked all this up, decided whether it was worthwhile or not. Why did they decide it themselves without you, Grandad Capriani? Why?"

* * *

The old man pulled off his hat and white locks fell to his shoulders. He bowed to the West. Then he raised his head and gazed into its fiery eye. He asked for the return out of the furnace of his sons, swallowed by the awful fire.

But the West hastened to drop the shadow of forgetfulness over the affairs and pains of men. And it sent only nocturnal doubts to the old man in answer.

Then the old man cursed the West.

The next day he turned to the East.

"Rising Sun, you restore lost hopes with the morning. Restore me my sons. Give them to me even if only as halves, let them be mutilated, let them be blinded, let them be but a fragment of what they once were, but restore them to me. Have pity on my old age, Rising Sun!"

But the Sun on his lofty throne did not hear the man crucified on earth, and Grandad Capriani turned his face from it.

On the third day he directed his prayer to the North. On the fourth to the wind blowing from the South. He had wept away all his tears, and when darkness fell before his eyes he cursed all four cardinal points. He went into his house and locked himself in, as in a grave.

Those who returned remembered the old paths and came to his house. They wanted to hear the old words from the old man. They knocked at the door but it did not open. It was shut against all, even against the seven little rascals, the sons of his sons. Weary of their mothers' weeping, frightened by

their mothers' hopeless looks, they ran out of their homes and hesitantly found the way to grandad. But grandad did not come to the door with apples and nuts like other children's grandads, so the little ones began to explore the yard. They walked round the house, climbed into the hen-house, and down into the cellar. The silence everywhere frightened them. But soon they were accustomed to it. They played hide-and-seek and buzzed among the flowers like a swarm of bees. When the mulberries were ripe they did not leave the branches until their faces and hands were black with the berries.

Mikhaitse was the first to realise that he was full up. He jumped down and with a deep breath, told his cousins, "That's enough for today, you locusts! Leave something for tomorrow."

The next day they were back as soon as it was light.

"Good morning, Grandad!"

No answer. They made for the mulberry tree. And so it went on, day after day, until the apricots were ripe. Then they set to on the plums. After that they raised their freckled noses to the ripening pears. But the tree was tall with no low branches they could catch to clamber up.

Then stones and sticks came into play. Each fallen pear was a cause for quarrels, shouts and even fights. They squealed in chorus like piglets.

"A-a-ah! Give it me! It's mine! I knocked it down!"

"No, I did!"

Then came swear-words learned from the Germans.

"*Sacramento!*"

"Give it me or I'll hit you!"

"O-o-oh! I'll tell my mum of you!"

One midday a door inside the house creaked and there was a sigh that seemed to come from under the ground.

A moment or two, and a bolt on the outer door grated. Then an old man with a long tousled beard appeared in the doorway. His face was thin and yellow, his eyes hollow, and he gazed at the children like one from another world. This apparition was like no grandad they had ever known and they fled in all directions.

Gipsy barked three times and Grandad Capriani went back into his room to eat and talk to his sons. But this time dinner was brief. His imagination could no longer summon up the shades of his sons from the past and seat them at the table. Then he went out again into the yard, sat down on a bench and looked at the wicket gate. But the grandchildren did not come. The bright sunshine stung his eyes, accustomed to darkness, and the fresh air made his head swim.

The summer was waning. Ripe pears fell and there was nobody to collect them. The children did not come back, they were running to other orchards. But that pear-tree could be seen from everywhere rising over the edge of the gully, the leaves gently touched by the wind whispered sweetly and the golden fruit glowed too enticingly not to draw the children. So one Sunday their heads rose over Grandad Capriani's fence like pots hanging on posts to dry.

"Please can we have some pears?"

"Soft ones!"

"Ripe ones!"

The old man raised his bloodless face and smiled. With a movement of his head he beckoned them to him.

Two of them he picked up.

He was very much afraid he might drop them, but the warm touch of them gave him new strength. He sent them to the pear-tree while he descended to the cellar and drained the remnants of wine. It was less than a jugful. When he

returned to his grandchildren they surrounded him, biting into pears and delightedly stroking grandad's snow-white beard.

There were seven of them, dark and chubby; they brought a bright happy feeling. Grandad poured out the wine. They drank eagerly and peered into the jug.

"And me, Grandad?" whined the youngest — the wine had not lasted till his turn.

"You'll have it in the autumn," said the old man. He looked at all the cardinal points, saying something the children did not understand. Then he went to the vineyard. It had to be tended. For all seven had returned. They wanted wine. And he, Capriani Amyaze, had none to give them. When had such a thing been known? How could terrestrial things be settled without listening to the song of the wine poured from jug to glass? He had to be prepared. Who could say — tomorrow, perhaps, they too would come with their tricky questions. And he would have to answer. He would have to talk about their fathers, and the reason why they were fatherless. And when they grew older, he would have to find for them the words he had not been able to say to his sons in leave-taking. Perhaps that was why they had not returned....

The vineyard had waited long for him. Nobody had tied up the vines, or sprayed them or pruned them.

Yet nevertheless, heavy clusters were hanging on them And these green clusters held the young wine.

RAISSA LUNGU

*Do You Know How the Sun Laughs?**

You see these fish, Marika? The scales must gleam like dew in the sunshine. I caught them today. You weren't at home, you'd gone to the stock section. I took my rod and went to the lake. The path led me through a wheat field. The ears bent towards me. And I heard their voice. Then the path turned under the willows. There was a breeze. The leaves clapped their hands. I stopped and listened to their voice. Ah, how good it used to be to lie under them, my head resting on my arms, and look at the sky through those leaves. I could gaze for hours into that blue distance, and at the leaves with slender shafts of light lancing through them.

I dearly loved the sun. And I loved you, Marika. And I loved to go fishing. Riding Roibu, in the evening, at sunset.

As far back as I can remember, the sun always looked in on me. It came and tapped at the window. With long transparent fingers. And laughed. Do you know how the sun laughs, Marika? It came, leaned its elbows on the windowsill, and laughed. We both laughed, the sun and I. Then it left the window and soared into the height. And from high up it signalled to me. It called me into the orchard, it showed me the dew and the grass, the meadows sprayed with flowers, the wheat, the lake which held the whole sky within it.

One time — I was already a young man then — I was coming back from mowing and stopped to rest under the

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willows. I laid my scythe beside me. Tiredness drew me down to the earth, and I stretched out on the low ground, facing the lake. It was shady and cool under the willows. But the lake was afire. Then you came along the path with a yoke across your shoulders to fetch water. You stooped and filled your buckets, then you looked about you. But me you didn't see. The willows hid me behind their green arms. Lightly you threw off your clothes and lightly entered the water. Your hair had the paleness of straw. You threw back your head to let the sun caress your face. You were so beautiful, Marika. And I thought then — were you not a sister of the sun?

Then later, Marika, we built ourselves a clay hut on the edge of the village. It was summertime. You mixed the clay with your feet and I carried water. When I poured it over the clay you leaned against my shoulder. You wiped your face with your sleeve. And laughed. You were young and we were very happy together.

Then after some years I bought Roibu. You still remember him? A white forehead and white feet, and sides that gleamed in the sunshine like silk. And small, round hooves. He always whinneyed softly when he saw me coming. Every morning I brought him a crust of bread in my pocket, I held it out to him on my palm. He took it with his lips and I felt his warm breath. And such a wave of tenderness came over me that I put my arm round his neck and kissed him.

When I came home from the hill in the evening you would be cooking, and I mounted the horse and hurried down to the lake. I urged him, he understood and galloped as though witches were after him. That was how he ran. By the willows he would slow down and go to the water's edge with small steps. I alighted and left him to graze.

The sunset was crimson and the water was crimson. But the fish jumped and broke up the water into fiery slivers, and

circles spread over the smoothness of the lake. Those evenings were good, Marika.

Roibu grazed, and I fished.

Such a quietness enveloped me that we returned at a walking pace.

You were waiting and came out to meet us. You took the bridle and fastened the horse to a post. Then we sat down to table. There was a small three-legged table I had made, and a few benches.

We had supper out in the yard, by the stove. And there we slept. On the earthen bank round the house. We spread wormwood and lay on it. It smelt so good, Marika. These nights were filled with its scent.

Marika, you hear me, Marika? Oancha, the chief at the gendarme post — you remember him? And the time I flung myself on him with a scythe? I would have driven it in under his ribs but people caught my arms.

When I heard of the decree requisitioning horses I was in a frenzy. I didn't know what to do, how to save our horse. Remember how we hid him in the thick shrubbery at the end of the orchard? We never took him out. We fed him at night and watered him at night. We told everybody we had sold him. But probably no one believed us.

Then came that Oancha. He went straight to the back of the orchard. He led the horse out onto the threshing floor. "So you sold him, eh?" he said and laughed.

I snatched up the scythe and rushed at him.

That night I cried like a kid. Right there, in the stall, where the manger bore the marks of his teeth. I bit my lips and smashed the manger. And you were crying indoors. Your eyes were swollen in the morning.

Then I sort of quietened. Yes, and things were happening, one after another. That year, 'forty, was all new for us. It was

a new life that had started, and one we didn't altogether understand right away. We went together to the club. And somebody came out from town and talked to us. He talked well, too. Then we started to study at the evening school. Remember how we struggled, how hard it was to write evenly and add syllable to syllable? You read well now, Marika. If you didn't read the papers to me, how would I know what's going on in the world?

When I left for the front I didn't weep. And you didn't, either. Your heart was turned to stone. You stood there at the edge of the village watching us go. I can see you now. You were in a black skirt and a blouse embroidered in crimson on the shoulders and in front. And your hair curled out from under your kerchief like gold, like the sun. I did not know then that I was seeing you for the last time.

Don't cry, Marika.

The war was ending. I kept thinking: if only it would end soon. So that I could go home. To you, Marika.

It was a bright sunny day. All the week it had been raining, but this day it cleared up. We were marching over alien soil. Ionica, Nicolae Vlaicu's son, was with me. A young lad, didn't even shave yet. He liked singing. He sang and sang, and then sighed.

"Eh, brother, when'll we be home again?"

But he never returned home. And I....

The lake must be looking very lovely, Marika.

When I was fishing today I could hear the fish jumping and feel the sun on my arms, on my face.

You know — every morning I wait for the sunrise. I go out into the yard, then to the end of the orchard, and wait. It rises behind the hill, but I do not see it. At night I dream of it. My nights are bright now. They bring me dreams, and all my dreams are full of sunshine. The Sun comes to

the window. It throws a handful of fiery golden spray at me. And laughs. Do you know how the sun laughs, Marika?

*Poppy Seed**

The sun scorched unbearably. It seemed to be welded to the sky, with no intention of moving.

Where there was no grass, the earth burned your feet. Splash water and it would hiss like quick lime. It was only in the shade of trees that one might somehow endure it. So Nicolae Dudeu decided to sit awhile under the old pear-tree. Perhaps that stabbing pain would subside. Ever since morning his side had been hurting. He got down first onto one knee, then with a grunt onto the other.

"A plaguy thing, getting old!"

Seated at last, he leaned his back against the rugged trunk and looked over at the bee-garden. The hives were like tiny white huts scattered among the trees. The bees flew about with businesslike briskness. One settled beside him on a dead-nettle flower. He reached out but could not touch it and his hand sank onto the grass, because the pain came back again.

"They don't have such an easy time, either," he muttered.

The words were in answer to the thought which had been nagging at him: time to remove the old queen from one of the hives as soon as a young queen emerged. He was waiting patiently for the moment, hoping apprehensively that the bees would not rebel.

He had been in charge of the kolkhoz apiary for about ten years — ever since Gheorghe Spynu and Andrei Jitaru had given the kolkhoz a few hives. That had been the start of it. He too had turned in his small hive.

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"Let's have more of them. And I'll take care of them, that's a job I'm right fond of."

Now the apiary really was a big one. Grandad Dudeu pottered about in it all day, he knew every corner, every hive and its history. In the village people said:

"He knows every bee by sight."

"He puts a ring on their legs."

"Like Granny Gafina does with her chicks."

When the bees began to swarm Grandad Dudeu was transformed. He made new hives and kept looking about to make sure he hadn't missed a swarm. His spirits were so good, he went about all day humming under his breath. His voice was weak and hoarse, but he sang cheerfully.

As spring approached he became restless, and at last he would announce to Granny Lizaveta, "Well, old woman, it's goodbye for a while, I'm going to my bees."

He moved over entirely to the bee-garden, to a tiny hut with a high porch and gay windows that stood at the far end of the orchard. The sun played in the glass almost all day. The bees, blinded by it, would fly at the light and bump themselves against the glass. Then grandad would put them away, chiding them.

"You'll kill yourself, little dafty."

He had a bench inside, right under the window, so that he could always see his bee-garden. Over it hung a loud-speaker. "So's I can hear what's going on in the world!"

He had spread wormwood and mint on the clay floor — there was plenty of it growing in that part of the orchard.

Now, sitting under the pear-tree, he let his thoughts wave free play. And they raced along the path to the village, to his home. What was Lizaveta doing now? She'd be dull, all alone. But then he remembered she was rearing chicks —

she would take them from the poultry section when they hatched, and deliver the ones already grown. So she had something to keep her busy. He concluded his thoughts aloud.

"When Andrei comes, I'll go back with him to the village."

Andrei was not his own son. His father had been killed at the front and his mother had died, so Nicolae Dudeu took him and brought him up. Now Andrei was the farm chairman. Elected by the members. And although he now had children of his own, to Grandad Nicolae he was still young and the old man worried about him. The farm was a big one, it took a good head to guide it. So grandad always had a mouthful of admonitions for him, and sometimes scolded him. But Andrei never took it amiss.

Now the old man was expecting Andrei any moment.

He rose to look along the road, and again the pain stabbed his side.

"A plague on it! Won't let me breathe, even!"

He sat down under the tree again, hugging its brief midday shadow, and began calling to mind what illnesses he had had in his time. And came to the conclusion he had nothing to grumble about.

When he was small his eyes had hurt. At that time there had been a wise woman in the village. She was called Lendutsoya. She had a cottage over the gully — small and dark, almost hidden by lilacs, a net of wild vines and sorghum tails. He remembered the passage hung with bunches of herbs, and their bitter, spicy smell. The old woman had had a very pretty daughter. He had been fascinated by her, but the girl had been older than he was and had married a man her own age.

It was to this wise woman his mother had taken him. She looked at him and spoke in a gentle, singsong voice.

"Take vitriol, dilute it with water and drop it into the boy's eyes."

That was how he had been cured.

His second illness was when he had hit his leg with a stone. The leg had swollen and matter kept coming out of an open sore below his knee.

The village had no doctor, and there was no way of getting him to the hospital in Beltsi.

"Likely there's worms in the bone," the neighbours said.

This time Granny Lendutsoya came to him of her own accord. She looked at the wound and went away. Then she returned with a prickly plant in an earthen pot.

"It's aloe, they call it century plant because it flowers once in a hundred years."

She pounded a leaf of it until it was mashed soft and moist, then laid it on the wound. And in a few weeks the place healed.

There wasn't a man, woman or child in the village who hadn't heard from Nicolae about that treatment. He always finished the same way.

"Aye, it was right bad, but then it got well. Only the leg was a bit shorter. But still and all, I fought in the first German war and I'd ha' fought in the second only for my age."

Grandad Dudeu never had anything else wrong with him and was a stranger to doctors. But now that plaguy stitch in his side wouldn't let him breathe.

"Looks like I'll get in at the doctor's clutches if I don't look out," he said aloud.

A hospital had been built in the village not long before. It had brick walls and a tiled roof. And there must be a lot of doctors there, when you passed you'd see white coats hang out to dry, a whole line of them.

Grandma Lendutsoya had died long ago. Miliutsa, her granddaughter, had followed in her footsteps, going to Kishinev some years before to train as a doctor.

Mebbe she's finished her learning, grandad wondered and thought again, looks like I'll have to go to that hospital. Get them to give me something.

His mouth was dry. He licked his lips, then rose and got himself somehow to the house. He drank some water, filled a mug and took it back with him to the tree, where he set it down beside him.

His lids dropped; a warm, pleasant light penetrated through them.

"What's the matter with you, father?"

He started, and raised his rough-skinned hand to his eyes.

"When did you get here?"

"Just this minute. I was passing and thought I'd drop in and see what you were doing. And found you asleep." Andrei smiled and sat down on the ground beside the old man, who moved over to give him a patch of shade.

His unharnessed horse cropped the grass by the road-side.

Grandad Nicolae looked at Andrei. He did not want to confess that he felt ill and worry his son, there were worries enough for him as it was. But he himself gave the old man a keenly probing look.

"You aren't ill, are you? You're looking sort of drawn."

Grandad Dudeu felt his forehead and passed his hand down his cheek as though trying to feel if it really were so.

"No — just sort of — a kind of stitch in my side. Eh, it's naught, it'll go. I only want to get to the village as quick as I can so's to be back by eve. Mebbe you can drive me there?"

"Sure thing. Right to the hospital. To Emilia Fyodorovna."

"Who?"

"Emilia Fyodorovna. You've never been sick so you don't know. We've got a new doctor."

Andrei set the old man down by the hospital door.

"Only mind you let me know if it's anything serious."

"Don't worry, it's naught serious."

Grandad marvelled at the courtyard — so big it was! He had never been inside and the flowerbeds could not be seen from the road. He stopped for a moment by them. Bees were humming over the golden petals of snapdragon.

"So you fly over here, too?"

He went through the doorway and into a corridor. Here he did not have to seek far, a door opened and a girl appeared. She came forward to meet him.

"Is it you, Grandad Nicolae?" she asked in surprise.

He looked at her in surprise even greater.

"Miliutsa?"

"Yes, Miliutsa."

"Andrei talked of some Emilia Fyodorovna. I never thought Emilia Fyodorovna could be Miliutsa."

She laughed. "Come in, Grandad — in here."

Inside the consulting room, he lost his wits a little. How ought he to start? She wouldn't understand him, "too young", passed through his mind.

Miliutsa took the lead. She made him sit down and began asking about the bee-garden, and Aunt Lizaveta, and how he felt. He confessed to a stitch in his side. He had never been ill up to now. He was old but he refused to be ill. Lizaveta had her chicks at home to keep her busy, but what could he do without his bee-garden?

Miliutsa made him undress, tapped and listened and said he would be well again and work with his bees, he just had to take the medicine she would prescribe. He took the prescription and prepared to go, but she stopped him.

"Have you any money with you? We've a chemist's right here."

No, he had none. She opened her handbag and took out a ruble.

"You can give it back later. No sense going home and back."

On the way back he thought all the time about Miliutsa. He wished her so much good that all his wishes been fulfilled she would never have shed a tear to the end of her days.

Arrived home, he took the medicine and then he and Lizaveta talked about the doctor. They recalled her as a little girl with a mass of ash-blond hair that kept falling down in front of her eyes.

"Comb your hair back, Miliutsa."

"I can see quite well like this."

Then they began going over all the young fellows in the village to find a suitable match for her. At last, after discussing them to the last one, they settled that she should choose for herself.

It was drawing on towards evening and Grandad Nicolae lay down to rest. But he could not arrange the cushion comfortably, there was something hard underneath it. He rose to settle it and a bag fell out from under the carpet on the couch. He picked it up.

"What have you got here?"

"A bit of poppy seed. I happened to see it and bought it. It'll come in handy if I make buns."

They were both fond of poppy-seed buns. Grandad Nicolae laid the bag on the windowsill and again thought of Miliutsa. He had a secret, something he had never told anyone. And today, talking to Lizaveta, for some reason he still kept silence.

They had always sown poppies in the garden. Every year. Miliutsa's parents lived close by, separated only by a path.

One day, coming home from the fields, he had found the girl in the garden. She was breaking off poppy heads, shaking out the seeds into her hand and licking them up. In a quick flash of anger he thought: I'll take her by the ear and march her off to her father, mebbe she takes after him. He went up to her.

"What d'you think you're doing here?" he asked loudly. The child started and blushed.

"I'm — eating poppy seeds," she sobbed and her fists went up to her eyes.

He did not march her off to her father. He stroked her hair. "Don't, now — don't."

It was only then he noticed the smoky tint of her hair. She raised frightened grey eyes. How like her mother she was! He sat down on the warm ground, took her on his knees and began breaking off poppy heads, still green, and shaking the seeds into her palm.

That evening Lizaveta marvelled: who could have been breaking the poppies?

"How do I know?"

He had never told her up to this very day.

Grandad Nicolae laid his hand on his side. The pain had dulled. He pressed a little. It seemed better. He poured out a glass of water and took another powder. He looked at his watch and then at the window — how high was the sun? His eye again caught the bag of poppy seed.

"Lizaveta!"

"What is it?"

"You really want to make them poppy-seed buns, eh?"

"Mebbe I'll make them. For Sunday."

Grandad Nicolae coughed.

"Well, I'll go. That stitch is better."

There was still a pain, however, and he slipped the rest of the powders into his pocket. He would take them in the bee-garden.

"What'll I bring you for supper?"

"Mebbe —" He paused, undecided. "Lizaveta —"

"Well, what's bothering you? Stop hiver-havering and tell me."

"Mebbe we can do without them buns. I could take the seed to Miliutsa."

The old woman laughed.

"Miliutsa? You think your poppy-seeds are any marvel to her? Here, take them."

He picked up the bag and left the house.

Miliutsa met him at the hospital door.

"What's the matter, Grandad? Are you still feeling bad?"

"Nay, it isn't that. It's got right, I just brought what I owe. And here — a bit of poppy-seed."

He pushed the bag into the girl's hand. She stammered, "Grandad Nicolae" in some embarrassment.

"It's naught, Miliutsa." Then he added, "Them powders did help. Now I'm going to the bee-garden."

Briskly he stepped down from the porch.

ANNA LUPAN

*Heulica's Roan**

All his life long Heulica had longed for a horse — some kind, any kind, even a bony nag, a caricature of a horse — but something he could take out to the fields when ploughing time came, and follow down the furrows. Follow his own horse. His own. Open his gate in the mornings for his bay, and coming back from the fields in the evening carry him an armful of fresh grass. Something to talk to when he quarrelled with his wife. To give the children rides — set them all on his back and lead them around just for the fun of it. And finally, to have the smell of manure in his yard. That horse was real, it lived a full equine life in his imagination, he could see it, he knew exactly how it looked: not very big, but quick and spirited. In his daydreams he curried it, stroked a crupper damp with sweat, picked up a hoof and looked carefully at the wear of the shoe.

He would often talk longingly about it to his neighbour Gyrnets. "If I only had a horse I'd make it a real beauty. Good enough for a general to ride."

If at such moments anybody drove past, Heulica could not refrain from criticising the driver.

"Look now, is that the way to care for a horse? Just look at it, I say! The mane all tangled and burs in the tail. Can't he fasten it up so it won't sweep the road? Eh, I can't stand the sight of it!"

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Gyrnets skilfully rolled a cigarette in the thin skin of a maize cob without spilling a grain of tobacco, drew in the smoke greedily, spat, and delivered his reply.

"A dog's life, durn it. You drudge and toil, and can't even get yourself a nag."

Sometimes they were joined by a third neighbour, Grandad Teoder, the village herdsman, who lived across the street. He was always cheerful, with his everlasting shepherd's pipe under his arm and a bag slung over his shoulder: he would listen to Heulica's complaints condescendingly, an enigmatic smile half-hidden among the wise lines of his face. Heulica expected some sort of sympathy from him too, but Grandad Teoder's contribution to the talk was like a sour spoonful poured into a bland mixture.

"And what d'you want a horse for?" he asked acidly. "Tired of having all your teeth, eh? The gendarme can knock 'em out just as good. Now, if you bought but a few sheep, that'd be another thing." He paused a moment and summed up with the irrefutable argument, "Mark my words, sheep's wonderful human beasts."

Heulica spat disgustedly into the roadside dust, turned and stumped angrily away from the fence. Nay, there wasn't one could understand a man. And how he wanted — now in particular — to see the sagacious face of his own horse turned to look at its indignant master. Even the boniest, most miserable nag.

When he had gone Teoder spoke again.

"Aye, he got that daftness from his father, I'm thinking. That father, may the earth lie light on him, was driver for the man as owned all the land round here — that Kalistrat, and he was right crazy about horses. Kalistrat never paid him wages all his life long, just let him tend the horses. And the poor fellow, Heulica's father that is, was right content with it.

And Heulica's got the same craze. And it's got him all kinked up, I'm thinking. Anyone'd think none others wanted a horse — you, mebbe, or me. But if we can't get one, no call to hang yourself. But he — he's right daft over it."

Gyrnets greedily drew in the last mouthful of smoke, burned his fingers, dropped the end into the dust and ground it out with his bare heel, repeated his favourite saying, "A dog's life", and they went their separate ways. After a few days, meeting, they returned to the same subject and everything was repeated, one complaining, the second consoling in his own way, the third smoking and cursing life. Of course, other grains were sometimes ground between the millstones of their talk, but as a rule Heulica's unslackable thirst for a horse was chewed over, again and again. Whatever might be the subject, Heulica's non-existent horse pushed its nose in. And impossible as it might seem, that horse, which lived only in the mind of one, began to influence the relations among these three neighbours. Grandad Teoder, a born clown, began to amuse himself by abusing the whole equine race. Merciful heavens, you should have seen Heulica then! His fury was such that it was better to keep well away from him. But if he wanted to put Heulica into a good mood, Grandad Teoder would start recounting mythical wonders about the wisdom of horses, their faithfulness, and so on and so forth. Gyrnets just stood smoking, now and then tossing in his usual "A dog's life, durn it". Gyrnets was no great talker and he alone knew the thoughts surging in his head.

The ball of time unrolled, its thread stretching out in monotonous greyness. Each of the neighbours was sure Heulica would never lead his bay by the bridle, any more than Gyrnets would become ruler of a kingdom. But then a ray of hope suddenly shone forth. Liberation came in 1940.

But before hope could really raise its head the war started, bringing fresh cares and misfortunes. And Heulica's horse galloped away over the hills, leaving only the dust of a dream unfulfilled. Teoder's two sons and Gyrnets went into the army and Heulica, who had a cataract on his right eye, remained at home.

With the taciturn Gyrnets away and Grandad Teoder grieving about his sons, the talks by Heulica's fence were a thing of the past. When grandad brought the herd home in the evening he never paused now to listen to Heulica's complaints. He found something to do in his own yard, or sat playing his favourite "On the Hill with the Sheep" on his pipe. That song at dusk was like the lament of the village. Often the sound of the pipe brought a boy's grubby face thrust up behind the stile. He would listen, holding his breath to avoid betraying himself. This boy was Milutsa, Heulica's nine-year son. Catching sight of him one day, Teoder called to him, "Come on in, you don't need prop up the fence, it won't fall down."

The boy, shy as a small animal, made off at top speed. And after several unsuccessful attempts to bring him in, the old man let him alone. If Milutsa preferred to prop up the fence, let him. Maybe he'd got some sort of bee in his bonnet, like his father.

In wartime, when the village dolefully lacked men, heaven help any of them still at home. Everyone pointed at him as though he were a leper. Heulica too did not escape. After being one of the most insignificant men there for over thirty years, he now stuck out like a sore thumb. Wherever he went he would hear remarks.

"One-eye's lucky."

"That he is, warming his backside on the stove beside his woman."

"Aye, his mill's working when all the streams have dried up."

"A true word, fools have all the luck. Better be born lucky than handsome."

The defect which had been a misfortune had now become a good-luck sign. And strange as it might seem, Heulica himself came to believe his cataract was a piece of luck. After all, why not? His vineyard was tended in good time, the espaliers put in, the vines fastened up, the straw stacked, the roof water-tight, the fence mended. You could see at once there was a man about the place. And success breeds success as failure breeds its like. When luck comes a sick man will be cured even by church bells. And so it was with Heulica. In the best times he had never been able to get even any kind of livestock, but now, when the earth was literally ablaze, when the very seed of horses was dried up, he suddenly bought a gelding. True, it was lame. But it was a horse! And not one of the sweet-biscuit horses sold at fairs, not a toy of baked clay, but a live grey horse with broad crupper and a white star on his forehead, as though fate herself had marked him for a reward to the long-suffering Heulica. From naught to riches, as the saying goes.

There can be no secrets in a village, and the news of Heulica's good fortune soon flew from end to end of it. God must have washed his head at Easter! Those with wicked tongues went round saying Heulica must have been up to something shady. After all — in these times when others were glad to keep their skins whole, there was Heulica getting rich! And no clear sight of how it had happened.

Actually, the good fortune which shone so suddenly upon him had at first borne a great likeness to misfortune, and Heulica himself could never have guessed how it would turn out.

It was this way. One day at the end of March, in the third year of the war, Heulica was wakened at dawn by a great noise, a din under his window as though all the dogs of the village were having their dogs' wedding. Heulica looked out and nearly collapsed. Sheep filled his yard, surging and bleating, with a number of soldiers in grey-green among them. Although he could not read, he had some idea about the situation at the front and had heard the Soviet troops had broken through and the Fritzes were on the run. But he certainly had not expected to see enemies in the village so soon. And that they would choose his yard of all others — that had certainly never entered his head. In general, throughout the war the village had seen little of the Germans. It lay tucked away among the hills, far from railways or main roads. Heulica himself had never even seen a train. If there was any disturbance in the village during the occupation, a couple of gendarmes would come to deal with it. And even they came reluctantly — who wanted to struggle along streets that stretched up and down steep clay slopes? By the time you've climbed up you're wet with sweat. And nothing to be got there, one poorer than the other. So Heulica had good cause for surprise, and for fright, too.

"Get up, wife, and light the lamp under the icons because this is our end," he stammered, and started to shake; his teeth clenched of themselves, he could not loosen them.

When he recovered his wits a little, he looked out again and saw there were only three soldiers, but a whole flock of sheep. Driving them to Germany, he thought. After a little while two trucks drove up to the big gates and four more uninvited guests were added to the confusion in the yard. Then a tall burly man came in, his head wound round with a green scarf. From the door he began snarling something in a language Heulica could not understand, then angrily

snatched up a bucket and clapped it on Heulica's head like a helmet. Incapable of thinking, by some sixth sense Heulica guessed he was being sent to fetch water.

That devil's imp Milutsa! No matter how many times you told him to fetch water, he'd left the house without any the night before. He kept putting it off till it got dark, and then said he was afraid to go, and Heulica himself had got his boots off and set them out to dry. So now the bucket was empty. Anyway, it was his own, whose business was it if there was no water in it? But the war had come into his house, better do as they told you, if you didn't want a bullet. Just for naught. So Heulica pulled on his pants, vowing inwardly that if nothing happened and he came out of it alive, he'd give Milutsa a hiding to remember all his life.

When Heulica came back with the water, the Germans had taken full possession of house and yard. All that was left to him was the big brick stove, and his first thought was to hide behind it. But nothing doing. The big room, which owing to trouble after trouble he had never been able to furnish as the best one like respectable folk did, had now been turned into a slaughter-house. The soldiers drove in sheep by twos and threes, stunned them with hammers, quickly skinned them and flung the entrails onto the floor. They pushed the meat into tubs, salted it, then loaded the tubs on trucks and drove off. And they made Heulica help them. The job of slaughtering took two days and when it was finished he looked as though he had been doing hard labour in the salt mines. They had not let him rest a moment. When they drove away as suddenly as they had come, he could not believe it was all over. He kept hearing the bleating of sheep, the roar of trucks and the guttural German shouts.

He cleared up the room a bit, but a great pile of sheep skins lay in the corner. Countless numbers of them. Of

course the Germans would not leave them, they would come back to fetch them. But a week passed and nobody came. Then Heulica decided to risk it and took one. He waited, and pulled out two more. After all, they had not counted them. And maybe they wouldn't come at all, he could hear gunfire every now and then. In those times sheepskins were wealth. It was worth the risk. So he quietly cured a skin and made himself a waistcoat. Still no Germans. Fine! Maybe they wouldn't come at all. So he started making sheepskin boots, to sell. In those three years of war everybody's clothes had worn out. Sheepskin boots were in greater demand than high patent leather boots today — more so, in fact. And they were easily made. Little work and less skill required. So the father made the boots, Milutsa wove straps to fasten them, and on Sundays the mother took them to market. Now they were riding high! The money they made was enough for a horse and clothes too, so that the family could cover their nakedness a bit. Heulica very sternly ordered his family not to let a word slip about the sheepskins. If anyone dared chatter he'd kill them, he threatened. And had it not been for Milutsa, nobody would ever have known the secret. Whether the boy was sorry for Grandad Teoder, or loved him for his playing — be that as it may, one day Milutsa came up to the old man with a piece of skin hidden under his shirt.

"Grandad Teoder," he said with unexpected courage, "do you need a bit of skin for boots?"

What a question! Of course he did, but where could he get it? However, there was something else that interested the old man: how had this timid lad who avoided everyone suddenly plucked up courage and himself started to talk? Of course, children were unpredictable creatures, especially when times were so troubled. He could mature in a single winter. But all the same —!

"Where did you get the skin?" Grandad Teoder asked, calculating how to make the best use of this sudden wealth.

"There's a whole pile of 'em in our attic," Milutsa bragged.

Then Grandad Teoder guessed how prosperity had come to Heulica. Yes, luck had come his way. As the old folk said, you never know which way the hare will jump. Grandad Teoder scratched his head. He had his own firm principles. It was bad to deceive a child. Bad. But what could you do? Want bore down till you couldn't catch your breath. That cursed skin Milutsa held fascinated him, he could not take his eyes off it. Only an utter fool would let such a chance slip. And then, too, if you looked at it soberly, those damned Germans had added more than one grey hair to his own head. They had taken everything, cleaned him out. So it wasn't such a sin to take something of what they had left. At last he made his decision.

"How much do you want, Milutsa, for that bit of skin?"

The boy shuffled. Wiped his nose a couple of times on his sleeve. Scratched the door-post with his nail.

"Well? Tell me, don't be shy."

"I want to play your pipe."

"What? What?" Grandad's eyes, like dying embers, lighted as though those same embers blown to a glow. "Now here's a marvel! Look at that, not like the Heulica breed at all!"

After that Milutsa spent much of his time with Grandad Teoder, helping him to round up the sheep and clean the yard. Whenever there was nothing left to do, he learned to play the pipe. The old man made him one from an elder twig, just as good as his own. Now the boy probed the secret of the birth of song.

The front was retreating towards Germany. Spring came. The village was loud and alive. But Grandad Teoder's melodies were still plaintive, filled with his own sadness. There was no news of his sons and the old man was tortured by premonitions. Milutsa had a sensitive understanding.

"Let's make them each a pair of boots," he suggested. "We've still got skins in the attic. I'll have one down quick."

It made him feel very bad to see the old man so despondent. Teoder weighed the idea for some moment, then said softly, "Let them come back first."

This was about the time when Heulica bought his horse. For days at a time he never left him, took him out to graze on the pasture just outside the village, curried him, plaited and replaited his mane. He watered his horse three times a day, and as though he were a child, not from the general trough by the well in the middle of the village where all the other horses drank, but from his own bucket. When Heulica led his roan gelding to drink people ran out to look, as though it were a tame bear. To add to the sight the whole family took part in the ceremony. One son rode, another led the gelding by the bridle, a third and fourth carried the bucket and a fifth urged the whole procession on. If Milutsa was missing, which happened fairly frequently, Heulica grumbled all the way: who'd ever heard of such a thing, a son not coming to help water the horse?!

Soon, however, the village became accustomed to the daily show, and nobody dropped his work to look.

The war ended and the men began drifting back in twos and threes. Life returned to its old channel. Heulica's neighbour Gyrnets came later than others — much later, but he did come. It was only old Teoder's sons who neither came nor wrote. The old man sought out the ones who had been at

the front to ask about his sons — perhaps somebody might have seen them, or heard something, let them tell the truth and not fear the telling, he could bear anything. But nobody had met them or seen them or heard anything about them, good or bad. They gave him every kind of soothing words — sometimes a man can come back after ten years, and all the rest of it.

"Folks are sorry for me; that means my sons are dead," the old man said one evening when Milutsa came to him. He sank wearily on the earth that banked up the house, and the pipe in Milutsa's hand let out a few pitiful notes and fell silent. The boy did not know what he could do to help the old man, to cheer him up a bit. Perhaps he should go to Gyrnets, get him to make something up, say he's met grandad's sons, or something? A lie cost nothing. And the old man would find life easier if he had even a shadow of hope. But Teoder seemed to guess his thought.

"Nobody can deceive a father's heart."

Milutsa felt thoroughly uncomfortable; he felt his own presence a painful reminder that there were lads alive, while Teoder's were lost. He ought to go. His mother often told him not to hang round people if they weren't in the mood for you. He rose. But he could not decide whether to say "good-night" or not. It was the thing you did say. But how could any night be good when grandad's heart was wrung with such torment? However, when Milutsa's pipe fell silent, the old man spoke.

"Go on, why've you stopped playing? Let them as is living — live."

Then Teoder went to his old trunk, a wooden one bound with iron hoops that contained his entire wardrobe, got down onto his knees, opened it, took out the new sheepskin boots and held them out to Milutsa.

"Here. Give them to your dad. I oughtn't to 've taken the skin that time. Like as not some widow-woman grieved for that sheep. There's her tears on the wool. And I'd a greedy eye, like an old fool. Folks is weak before temptation."

Milutsa took them uncertainly. He carried them home, holding them distastefully in two fingers.

"Where's your horse, Heulica?"

"Sold."

"Who to?"

"I didn't ask for an identity card."

"Don't play the fool, Heulica."

"What 'ud I want to fool you for?"

"Where's the horse? You can't have sold it."

"Why not? Do I have to ask you first?"

"Because now there isn't a man fool enough to buy it."

"Fool enough — to buy *my* horse?!"

Heulica made an effort to straighten his stooping back and shoulders, and his eyes flashed haughtily under the thick black brows. To insult his splendid horse like that! He nearly set about Gyrnets with his fists, but managed to restrain himself.

"You'd have bought it yourself and glad to, if your pocket wasn't empty," he said arrogantly.

The neighbours stood facing each other, heads thrust forward like fighting cocks. They had forgotten those long-past years when they shared their troubles by the gap in Heulica's fence. Now their talk was hard and angry. A collective farm was being organised in the village, and the neighbours were separated by a long table spread with red bunting. It was like a barricade. Heulica hated Gyrnets and the table too. And Gyrnets, tired of the long fruitless argument, pulled a homespun lace-edged napkin out of his

pocket and wiped his wet neck. Ever since his election as chairman of the village Soviet his wife had seen to it that he always had a napkin with him, to serve as a handkerchief. The chairman! How could he go about without a handkerchief? Of course he couldn't!

Heulica utilised the brief pause and with the highest pleasure, closing first one nostril and then the other, he blew his nose onto the stone floor of the ex-drawing-room of the ex-landowner Kalistrat. The man who had come from the district centre to help the village move over onto the new rails cautiously got his polished top-boots out of the way. He did not know Moldavian and waited patiently for Gyrnets to tell him what it was all about. All this talk about something that was perfectly clear! Strange.

Gyrnets did not quite know what to do — that was evident from the diligent way he wiped his neck, face, and neck again. From this Heulica guessed his opponent's weakness. He must get out, the sooner the better. Not much asked of a fool — just get out. He beat his sheepskin hat which his father had worn before him, looked round, turned and made for the door tossing back over his shoulder, "God be wi'ye for all good."

Gyrnets made a dash after him, pushing the napkin into his pocket.

"Hi! Wait a bit. That isn't all."

Heulica stopped — not very willingly. Gyrnets's eyes bored into him.

"So you say the horse is sold, eh?"

"I've told you so."

"I don't believe you."

"Why not?"

"Because there's been a decision: nobody has the right to sell or buy a horse until collectivisation's finished."

For a moment Heulica seemed to be taken aback, but at once recovered his untroubled look.

"That's as may be. But they bought mine."

Gyrnets exchanged a few words with the man from town, then selected a paper from a pile on the table and held it out to Heulica.

"Here you are. Get out."

Since boyhood Heulica had learned one thing — to be very cautious with papers, especially any offered you by a boss. So cautious he was.

"What's that paper?"

"Your application to join the co-operative. Don't you know it?"

"What am I do with it?"

"Take it where you took the horse."

"You mean — ?"

"Yes. I do." Gyrnets jerked his head at the door.

"What, you won't take me into the collective farm?"

"Got it right in one."

"Mebbe I've come from the wrong sort o' folks?"

"No, the right sort."

"Then why —?"

"Stop playing the fool. I've wasted enough time on you as it is."

But Heulica wasn't so easily silenced.

"And who'll you make your kolkhoz with?" he asked ominously. "With kulaks? Bloodsuckers? Is that it?"

"None of your business."

"Nay, it's mine."

Heulica felt himself master of the situation. You don't catch an old bird with chaff, Gyrnets had better not reckon on it. Of course, he didn't want a quarrel, you ought to keep peace with a neighbour. But that Gyrnets was getting above

himself now that they'd trusted him with bread and knife, as the saying goes. Heulica bristled like an animal about to spring.

"Aha, now you're the big boss round here, you can chivy folks round as you like!" He launched his attack not too loudly. "Eh, no, them times has gone. I was poorer nor you and treated worse. Who had it bad wi' the Germans, you or me? Whose fence did they break down and burn, yours or mine? Eh? Whose good room did they treat like an outhouse? Yours or mine? I can't get all the muck off the floor yet. And where you were all the time no one knows, that's still to be cleared up. There you stand wi'out a scratch, naught to show you ever fought at all!"

And so on and so forth.

Gyrnets's face was the colour of young grass. He had never been so insulted in his life. To abuse him, a front-line soldier, like that?! And he was supposed to humour the fellow? "Eh — a dog's life, durn it!" Gyrnets spat, jumped up and seized his neighbour by the front of his clothes. Maybe you could shake some decency into him if you made his teeth rattle? There were some that couldn't understand anything else. And it would have ended badly if some of the village men had not separated them.

The hostility between them lasted a long time, however. Gyrnets laid his ears back: so long as he was chairman he wasn't having Heulica in the kolkhoz. That was that. Easier to kiss the back of your head than talk Gyrnets round. Heulica for his part wore down the steps of the district offices, taking in complaints against his neighbour. In all of them the main point was that he was the poorest of the poor and his family always had been, that he had been ground down by the bourgeoisie and now his own people's power in the person of Gyrnets was persecuting him. The district

administration interfered, trying to shame the neighbours into making it up. Even Grandad Teoder went to visit Gyrnets at home with fatherly exhortations.

"It's not the right thing to be abusing each other, it looks real bad. You're the laughing stock of the whole village. You at least ought to show sense and reason, it's you the people chose for chairman. That miserable roan came to Heulica by dark ways and by dark ways it's gone. Things come and they go. It's a law of life."

Gyrnets wiped his neck with his napkin-handkerchief, repeated his favourite remark about a dog's life a few times — and gave in.

That same evening, when the children were in bed, Heulica and his wife took a lantern, climbed to the loft of the barn, cleared away some bundles of hemp and raised a trap-door. There was a brief whinny and a strong smell of horse manure. In the weak light of the lantern Heulica's face glowed, he seemed younger and even handsome.

"Bring a bucket of water," he jerked over his shoulder to his wife; he climbed down a ladder he had made from a felled acacia into a completely shut-off end of the barn.

"Well, how're you feeling, lad? I've been making a fight for you — more'n I'd ever have made for the children. But I won it. And now you'll live without any kolkhoz where you'd be hauling for everyone."

While his wife was fetching the water, Heulica stood with his arm round the gelding's neck; he wept, and wiped his eyes on the harsh mane. What tears were those — of joy at having a horse at last, or at the bitterness of having to hide it as though it were stolen? He wept, and his wife stood silently. She had never before seen her husband weep.

The horse occupied a narrow space cleverly cut off from the rest of the barn by a wall of stones reaching to the ceiling.

It never entered anyone's head to wonder why Heulica's barn seemed more cramped. Night after night he had tossed on his bed before he thought of this plan. But now the horse belonged to him alone, it was there, close to him, at any moment he could look at it, stroke it, talk to it. What the future would bring only the future could tell, but for the present he triumphed in his own ingenuity.

For twenty months the sweet madness continued. Like a miser who has spent his life garnering treasure and has not the strength to wrench his eyes away from it, Heulica crept up to the loft every night, let himself down and talked for hours to his horse. All the words of affection in his vocabulary were poured into the roan's ears, all the tender names he knew. He grudged no hay or grain or curry-comb. Every night he curried the horse as though it were to be on show the next day.

Yet for some reason the horse moped, lost appetite, was finicky about food. When water was brought he splashed out more than he drank. He was pining for the furrows and the fields. He whinnied sadly and struck his hoof against the wall. And then one night when Heulica came as usual to see his treasure, the horse lay stretched out on the floor with glazed eyes.

"What did he lack, eh? What do you think, wife?" Heulica sobbed. "I fed him and watered him and tended him."

Never in her life had she crossed her husband and she was in no haste to give an opinion. She thought a moment before answering.

"Mebbe he hadn't light enough, that's why he died."

Heulica broke down the now unneeded wall to drag out the carcass and bury it. His wife was close by, collecting the horse

manure in her apron, muttering to herself — just loud enough for her husband to hear.

"I'll mix it with clay the morn and plaster the bank round the house. That'll be some good at least from the beast."

*Homesickness**

He was a boy of about nine, small and silent, with dreamy, melancholy eyes. Those eyes struck me at once — the eyes of an adult who has known hardship and suffering. In the children's home he was not particularly liked, by either children or teachers. The children were alienated by his morose, solitary ways, the teachers because he was constantly giving trouble. He was moved from group to group and had to be watched carefully to prevent him from making off, especially during walks or excursions. Otherwise — who could say what might happen? You could expect anything and your job is your job.

He could not be won over like other children with toys, or songs, or various amusements. He evidently had a mind of his own, but he did not open it up to anyone.

He had made several attempts to run away, but each time he was found and brought back. There was certainly no other child who gave so much trouble. So when I was told that he was to be in my group, I can hardly claim to have been delighted. However — if you've entered the circle you have to dance, I thought. You can't have fads and fancies at work, even if something is rather definitely not to your taste. Especially if you're a comparative newcomer to the job.

I saw him first after one of his abortive run-away attempts. He was sitting all alone in a room, drawing something in a big exercise book. He did not turn when the door creaked —

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* © Translation into English. Progress Publishers 1976

whether from absorption or indifference it would have been hard to say.

"Roma, this is Anna Alexandrovna, your new teacher," said Anastasia Petrovna, the headmistress, an energetic woman with an authoritative manner, said to know a child's heart like the palm of her hand. Before I even started work she had explained in all detail what awaited me in this new sphere.

I had heard little that was pleasant about the small boy sitting there, but I had imagined him otherwise — so much so that the actual sight of him was quite a disappointment.

But cannot a person's face say one thing, while his heart conceals something very different? It certainly can. All right, the face. But the eyes? They too can be deceptive. But not the eyes of a child. I have never yet seen a child whose eyes could lie.

The headmistress's words left the boy unmoved. In fact, he ignored us and went on with his drawing.

"You must stand up when grown-ups talk to you," the headmistress rebuked him.

The boy slowly rose, without hiding his resentment at being interrupted, and began to scratch the wall with his nail.

"Don't scratch the wall. Turn round and say 'good morning'."

"Good morning," he mumbled without raising his eyes.

"Let me have him alone," I whispered to Anastasia Petrovna. She looked at me, not quite understanding, but went away.

He turned his back and went on with his drawing. I said nothing, but sat down at the other end of the table and started to draw on the edge of an old newspaper. My artistic

talents are modest, to say the least, but somehow I had the idea that for the present there was no other way I could win his confidence.

For some time we were silent. Sun beams played hide-and-seek on the ceiling. A fly caught in a spider's web buzzed desperately for help. Roma went on with what he was doing, just as though nobody else were there.

I soon began to feel, however, that my presence made him uncomfortable. He breathed fast and sometimes stole glances at me from the corner of his eyes.

"Would you like to look? Come over here," I invited him.

He turned large thoughtful eyes on me.

"What are you drawing?" he asked shyly.

I was not drawing anything specific, just moving my pencil. But knowing his was an age that dreams of airplanes — jet planes, of course — I answered without hesitation, "A jet plane."

My obvious lie did not produce the effect expected. Without even moving he spoke almost in a whisper.

"You know what I'm drawing? A flower, a violet."

I was both surprised and glad. Flowers were what I could draw best of all. I could do hundreds, thousands, as many as you wanted, with no effort. A straight or curved stalk, a small circle, five or six more round it, and finished.

In an instant I had sketched five or six daisies and held out my newspaper.

"I'm fine at flowers," I said, pleased with myself. "Look!"

He came closer. His eyes suddenly sparkled as though lamps had been lighted in them, his lips curved in a smile.

"Are those flowers?" he asked pitilessly.

"They are," I insisted.

He laughed gaily.

"I'll show you how to do them."

I gave up my place. He drew a few light lines with one coloured pencil, then with another, and a living flower rose before me, as though a wand had been waved.

"Is it like a flower?" he asked impatiently.

"It certainly is."

"My flowers always are."

His eyes were frank and happy. He had lost that shy reserve. And when we parted after a little while, I felt he was beginning to thaw.

The following days I made a real effort. I tried to spend as much time as I could with Roma, told him stories and showed a great interest in his drawings. And it began to have its effect. He was more friendly with me than with others, not so shy, and when we met he sometimes smiled as one does at an old friend.

Everybody said he had changed, he was not so withdrawn and hostile, he was learning to be obedient. And I was given the credit for it.

Then came one summer afternoon. All morning we had been planting trees. Some of the children had taken longer, and the ones who finished first started playing. Two little scamps harnessed a maybug to a cart made out of a match-box.

I sat under an old walnut tree watching the children languidly. I was in that drowsy state when you don't want to open your mouth. It was a long time since I had done physical work and I was tired. All my joints ached. I revelled in the joy of lying in the grass after a day's work, knowing that the time has not been wasted. I felt fine. And perhaps, in spite of apprehensions with regard to senior staff and the merry noise of the children, I might well have fallen asleep but for a sentence which jerked me out of my hazy peace.

"Roma's run away," somebody said close by.

I jumped up as though stung, still hardly realising to what extent the news concerned me.

"Run away — how?"

"With his legs."

"Impossible!"

"Unfortunately that boy doesn't ask permission before he makes off."

Before me stood Salamurica, in charge of B Group, the one from which Roma had run away the last time. I took no notice of the dig and went off to get details. The point was that Roma had not been out in the field with us. It had been his turn for dining room duty. But I had been warned that he must never be left without an eye on him. All the way to the home I called myself every name under the sun.

I searched for him until late that night. I rang up the neighbouring villages and asked people to stop the runaway. I searched and inquired, I kept the telephone busy, but without any hope of finding the boy.

There is a saying that he who seeks with faith will find. I had no faith in success, but nevertheless I found him— the following evening, far away, at the forester's lodge.

When I entered, there he was standing with his back to the door, his eyes fixed on some point on the ceiling.

"Roma?"

He started. He looked miserable and frightened.

I put my arms round him and petted him, forgetful of all pedagogical rules.

"You ran away? But why? Is it so bad with us?"

He shook his head but said nothing.

"What was it for this time?"

"Just — because," his voice was barely audible.

"Is the food bad?"

"No."

"Not enough time for play?"

"No."

"Do they beat you, hurt you?"

"No."

"What's it all about, then?"

He gave me a mistrustful look and tried to wriggle out of my arms.

"You're just sly. You ask me, and then you'll go and tell Anastasia Petrovna."

"No, I won't tell."

"I know...."

"What can I do to make you believe me?"

He was more stubborn than I had expected. I let him go with the feeling the headmistress had been right. I was going to have plenty of trouble with him. How vexed I felt — with myself, with him, with the whole world! I stood there helplessly in the middle of the room, I could not think what to try now, what to do to make him understand that I wanted nothing bad for him, I was fond of him.

Roma's voice interrupted my thoughts.

"You say you won't tell?"

"I won't."

"Honest?"

"Honest."

He took my hand uncertainly, and led me to the window.

"There's a hill the other side of the forest," he said softly. "And after that there's another forest. And then two more hills. And that's where our village is."

He let out a deep sigh, stood for some moments, his forehead pressed against the cool glass, and continued still more softly.

"On the edge of the village there's an elm. It's tall, and it's got a lot of branches. I want to see it. I *want* to."

I stood there petrified with nothing to say. If he had told me he wanted to go round the world, or fly to the moon, I would have been less surprised. To run away so many times, endure so much — and all for the sake of a tree? But — who could tell what the memory of that tree meant to him, why he sought it with such obstinacy? So I made a suggestion.

"We'll go home now, and then we'll go together to look at the elm."

"I want to go alone," he said softly but decidedly.

"Nobody'll let you go alone."

"Then I'll run away."

"And we'll find you again and bring you back."

"Then I'll run away again."

There was such determination in his voice that I felt a sudden impulse to let him go where he would. I drove away the enticing and terrible thought as one drives away an obsessive temptation. The very idea was madness.

I wondered desperately how I could coax him, I talked sheer nonsense. I promised him that when he was a little bigger — after all, he was too small now to set off alone, some wild animal might attack him. I talked and talked.

He said nothing. I saw it was all no good and put him to bed. It was late, and we would have to be up with the dawn.

Soon Roma was sound asleep. But his sleep was disturbed. Even in his dreams he seemed to know no peace. Shadows of helplessness and pain passed across his face.

Stubborn little fellow! I was sorry for him. I kissed him softly and lay down alongside.

Perhaps at this very moment he was dreaming of his elm, he was standing under its spreading branches, crying with joy. Who could say? The world of dreams is still unexplored. In the quietness of night the boy's secret looked quite different. I understood him. Each one of us had his own

childhood tree. It is linked up with mother's first smile, the first fairy-tale and the first pieces of mischief. I too had my elm. And although it had not the compulsive power to draw me that Roma's had, the thought of it brought back memories, and I floated afar, far away into the world of dreams.

I was wakened by a feeling of cold at midnight or perhaps somewhat later. For a moment, dazed with sleep, I did not know where I was. Then I came to myself, felt in the bed and found I was alone. The chill of night and the scent of leaves came in through the wide-open window.

I wakened the forester, told him what had happened and asked for his help. Until dawn we searched up and down, length ways and crossways, but in vain. Roma seemed to have vanished through the earth.

"It wasn't Roma," I lied when I returned to the children's home.

The headmistress gave me a piercing look.

"Escaped right out of your hands?"

There was nothing I could say. Silently I listened to a reprimand and a categorical warning that the boy must be found, or else....

I could settle down to nothing. Where was he now? I had made an unforgivable mistake. I should not have stayed overnight at the forester's. I was wretched. The reprimand I had received was nothing to what I told myself.

I had no hope of ever seeing Roma again. He had fooled me. His elm-tree was just a pretext. He knew, the rascal, how to get round me. Those sorrowful eyes evidently concealed a fox's cunning.

I had only one meagre consolation: nobody knew the whole truth; I would have been a general laughing-stock. For the hundredth time I vowed never again to believe anybody.

A week passed in this way. Then one morning I found him standing by the door. He had come back. Tired, dirty, his legs scratched till they bled and his pants wet with the dew. He had been waiting for me to appear. When he saw me he ran to meet me, hugged my waist and hid his face in my coat.

"Roma! You?"

A choked whisper through tears.

"Did you see the elm?"

"No, they've cut it down. I came back. I missed —" he swallowed convulsively several times, wiped his eyes with the back of his hand and concluded "— you!"

GEORGE MENYUK

*A Tram Goes to the Depot**

I listened to the rumbling of the tram and caught fragments of a song from a loudspeaker, while the fragrant May wind whispered outside the window. The tram was going fast down Armenia Street, its old joints rattling. The night had opened star-spangled wings. The last tram was on its way to the depot, half empty, because it was late. The streets alternately gleamed with a pale blue half-light, and were plunged into darkness again. The driver handled with his levers, speeding up the pace, or slowing it. He was quite young, not very tall, with a yellow beret pulled down on one side, and evidently in good spirits as he hummed a merry song to himself. This was his last trip on the antediluvian vehicle and he was heartily glad, he was impatient to deliver it at the depot and be quit of it. Starting with tomorrow trams would vanish from our town; starting with tomorrow there would be smart new trolleybuses on our streets.

The tram ground all its old joints. It was making its last trip, to the depot. The tired conductor sat in her corner, a middle-aged woman with a thin dark face. She was counting money, folding it into packs and putting it away in the bag that hung from a raw-hide belt. The tram went on with brief halts. It was late, there were no passengers waiting. It announced this last trip to the town with its grating bell, the

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rumble of wheels and the squeal of brakes when it turned for the last time into Sculeni Loop.

The streets were seeing the tram home; flowering acacias followed it like a wedding procession on fiery horses; the bright lights of the houses passed in a farewell relay. The tram made a brief halt. A tall old man entered, stooping slightly, resting his weight on a stick with a nickelled ball at the top. The tram was empty but he took some time selecting a place to sit, critically examining the time-worn seats; at last he sat down opposite me and sighed.

"Well, and so I'm seeing the last tram home. I've at least been able to ride about on the trams up to now, but now I haven't even that pleasure left. Everything's changed, the whole town's changed."

The conductor objected, "Now you'll ride in a trolleybus. They're more comfortable."

"At ninety it's hard getting used to changes," the veteran of trams answered sadly.

The tram muttered something indistinct, its old joints shook feverishly. I was about to join the conversation, I wanted to add something about habits, but at that moment a noisy crowd of young people came bursting in. Three young fellows and two girls seemed to fill the whole tram with their laughter.

"Here's an old wreck for you — a regular scrap-heap," one bawled and made a sweeping theatrical gesture round him.

In his new grey suit he did not want to use the battered old seats, but stood in the middle. The fragrance of flowering acacias drifted through the windows, and street lamps peeped in. A young fellow in a black suit held a portable tape recorder on his knees. He backed up the lad in grey's idea about the tram — it's "Rabelais genre", like the giant horse

Gargantua rode. Grey Suit found the comparison with Gargantua's horse brilliant and laughed loud and long.

"Hi lads, what's so funny," called a fair-haired girl. "What's so funny?" And laughed too.

Only two were silent, a young fellow in a dark blue jacket and a girl holding two carnations. Nothing seemed to amuse them, not even the jokes of Black Suit.

Suddenly the old passenger brought his cane down angrily on the floor.

"It is a sin to laugh at old age," he said sternly in the sudden silence. "The tram has done its duty. It has grown old in toil."

The old man looked reproachfully from one to the other, saw shamed faces and softened.

"Now, I can remember when the first horse trams came. That was before the Revolution. There were four horses pulling the tram, and all the same it was a marvel to all. Folks came to look as if it was something at a fair. But when the first electric tram came out they thought it must be moved by the black art. It was like a miracle that a tram could go all by itself, without horses. And now fifty years have passed, only fifty years —" The old man looked at the conductor and then at me, perhaps seeking someone who would agree: no, fifty years isn't such a long time.

"Believe me," the old man continued softly, "it's really quite a short time, fifty years. They go so fast — the years."

He fell silent.

A muffled argument had risen between boys and girls. After the old man's outburst they spoke in lowered voices. From what I caught I gathered that the girl with the carnations was to marry a geologist and go away with him to the Amur. Her friend insisted hotly that she was doing the right thing. I heard her repeating: "Well, what does it matter

if they haven't known each other long? What does it matter? If they've made up their minds, they must be in love. Isn't that right, Marta?" Marta blushed; the hands of the young man seated beside her trembled and his face suddenly looked wretched. "In love!" the young fellow with the tape recorder broke in roughly. "Just in a hurry to be married, that's all there is to it. Grabbed her chance." "Oh, you're impossible," Marta's friend said angrily, but the young fellow had the bit in his teeth. "Let Vlad say what he thinks of it all. Marta's cocked a snook at him!" The young man in the blue jacket turned pale but answered with dignity, "Marta and I are friends." The one with the tape recorder met that with a shrug and a sarcastic smile.

How the argument would have ended is hard to say, but the brakes ground harshly on. The tram jerked a couple of times and halted. The cheerful driver announced, "An unscheduled stop!"

A giant refrigerator truck was blocking practically the whole of the road.

The young people all tumbled out.

"It's quicker to walk!"

"And better, too, than that old heap!"

"Just smell the acacia!"

The old man shook his head sadly and rose reluctantly.

"I'd better get out, too. I'm almost there."

He left the tram and again I was alone with the conductor. She watched him go, then began to count money again, jotting dawn figures on a scrap of paper.

Each one of us has to part with his own places, with those close to him, with the accustomed things, but each one takes the parting in his own way. Separation is inevitable. "Whether you want or not, drive the oxen on", as the saying goes. For the young partings are easier, before them lies the

new and unknown, they are discoverers. The girl with the carnations was leaving her home town, but love awaited her, she was answering its call and could therefore snap the slender threads of earlier affections with no particular difficulty. The old passenger, one might say, was parting only with his accustomed transport, but for him it was a farewell to a half century of his life. Changes are not taken easily at ninety. The past as a rule does not return, or if it does, then only for others. Partings lie before each one of us, each one must leave the clear springs, for each there are railway stations, or roads, but each one takes the parting in his own way.

The tram started off again along Sculeni Loop. The intoxicating air flowed in and disturbed me. Suddenly I recognised a familiar street. Yes, yes, this was where I used to run along to school, frightening sparrows with my catapult along the way. The road was still cobbled.

The street ran at an angle from the edge of town until it came to the tram lines. This was where I waited every day for Mum, just to catch a glimpse of her. In those far-off times she was a conductor. This was the stop where I waited every day with aching impatience. The red tram would appear, the bell sounding sleepily. Then from somewhere up above, higher than the clouds, I would hear Mum's voice calling my name. I barely had time to see her slender hand waving to me as the tram raced past, and her sweet smiling face. Apples would curve through the air — yellow, red, white — like rain below a rainbow. The apples would jounce and roll over the cobbles. By the time I had picked them up the tram would be far away, faintly jingling. Only a weak hand waved a goodbye from the rear platform. The cobbles remained, but the apples....

Now the last tram was on its way to the depot. It might be

from this very tram that my mother's hand had waved to me. And I could not reply, I could not overtake her even if I chased after the tram for ten years, a century, an eternity. And the cobbled street was to me like a steel sabre lying in a museum.

The sleep of earth was guarded by celestial lamps. The electric lamps along the street cast a weak trembling light. The upper stories of the buildings were lost in the darkness above. The tram moved jerkily, like an abandoned ship. But sometimes it seemed to me like a canopied hearse pulled by invisible horses, while some persons, likewise invisible, carried the torches. The brass bell jangled now and then, as though reluctantly. The hearse moved without haste. The acacias in their white dresses stood along its path, as the legend describes the shepherd's funeral. But just round corners, behind the stalls, in the silent passages great cowled shadows hid. The hearse moved quietly through the crowd of nocturnal lights. It was making its last journey. Then the lights would go out.

I alighted by the depot. The tram went on inside. There was nothing left for me to do but go home. But a vague inner voice held me back.

In that depot I once saw a very strange thing. A boy's restlessness often sent me out a-wandering. Once I strayed into the depot and prowled about among the open summer trailers. This was in June, the hottest summer month — the oven month, it is called in our parts — and the sun was scorching. But in the depot I felt fine. I could look at the old dismantled engines, I could untwist screws and nuts and nobody scolded me. I could climb under the roof of a trailer and pretend to be the captain of a ship on a round-the-world voyage. I chose one standing in a dead end and climbed onto the "bridge". A half-grown sparrow chirruped on a seat at

the other end of my trailer-vessel. He was unimposing, grey and ruffled, but a ship had to have a crew so I made him a sailor. I remember how a shaft of light fell on him through the back window, and although the sun burned unmercifully he seemed to like it, and chirped without stopping.

That is the memory I have: a silken blue sky, a fiery shaft of sunshine and the chirping of the sparrow. Suddenly a dark object hurtled down from above, crashed through the glass of the trailer and thudded on the floor. I jumped up, startled. On the floor lay a big, handsome hawk. It was quite dead.

What could have happened to the hawk? I looked at it, completely bewildered, until light dawned: it had been killed, crashing through the glass. From somewhere in the height it had seen the carefree little sparrow basking in the sunshine. The hawk had had no idea of the thick glass between him and his prey. The sun shining through had made it invisible. So now the haughty, arrogant hawk lay on the floor like a dirty rag.

The sparrow was motionless, paralysed by fright. But when the shock passed he rose in the air shrieking an avian curse and flew off at top speed.

I watched him go, and only then saw a neat circular hole in the glass. Workers came and looked at it in surprise — it might have been made by a skilled glass-cutter. The hawk aroused less interest and talk than that round hole in the glass.

Now the conductor came out of the depot. She noticed me, looked back, then came up to me and asked why I was standing there, had I lost something in the tram?

"No, no," I said. "Everything's all right."

"Maybe you forgot something valuable, I can inquire at the office."

"No, I haven't forgotten anything. Don't trouble yourself."

The woman gave me a probing look.

"You needn't hesitate. Perhaps you really have lost something, some small thing?"

"I haven't lost anything or forgotten anything," I shrugged — nothing to lose and nothing to forget.

"You're waiting for somebody, then?" she said, smiling, and eyed me from head to foot. "It's late now, they've all gone. So if you're waiting for someone —"

"Yes, you're right, it's late," I agreed quietly.

We walked side by side for some time.

"Sometimes you can lose some small thing and you regret it all your life," the woman said thoughtfully.

I started, and stumbled over a stone.

"Yes. You're probably right."

"How wonderful the air is tonight! The acacia's in blossom."

I did not want to answer. I rolled a cigarette.

A great star-filled sky arched over my town. And every star a riddle. Some stars have died long ago yet their light still comes to us from the great distances of space.

Could our partings also leave their trace among people?

*Kaloyan**

By the well at the edge of the village he stopped the truck. But he did not get out, he just sat there behind the wheel watching children playing. The game was familiar. He had played it himself as a small boy. The ritual was still the same, so was its place — by the well in a small gully thickly grown with weeds.

A line of children were approaching from a crooked street bordered with old fences. They moved slowly, in imitation of

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adults walking in a funeral cortege. They emerged from the shade of tall acacias scorched by the heat and followed a pale track polished by many shoes. Two boys carried a small board. On it lay a doll, the long-suffering Kaloyan carved from a piece of wood. "Kaloyan" means "Handsome man". The imagination of children can certainly work miracles: and it would have taken a very great stretch of imagination to think of the word "handsome" in connection with the Kaloyan carried by the boys. His teeth, reminiscent of sunflower seeds, were bared in a strange smile, his nose was a maize cob, his black mustaches were tufts of wool that hung lifelessly, but his eyes — green buttons — turned a wide, clear gaze up at the empty sky. A sharp-peaked peasant cap was on Kaloyan's head, sheepskin boots on his feet; home-spun jacket and trousers, and a knotted staff in his hand completed the costume. This last detail vaguely reminded Lion of something and he looked at the doll again. Could he have seen it before? Although the children had decorated it with leaves and flowers, this Kaloyan was more like a scarecrow than the handsome young blade the children imagined. And then — that strange, limp smile.

In front of the procession marched a little fellow holding a cherry branch with a white rag fastened to its tip — symbol of a funeral. The girls lamented loudly, the gigglers spluttering behind their hands. "Kaloyan, yan! Kaloyan, yan!"

Children came pelting out of the end houses carrying broken mugs and jugs or even old tins, and quickly joined the procession. Some had candle-ends.

Lion watched curiously. Amazing, how children preserve their games, their play patterns from generation to generation! He wanted to see it right to the end, to bring back his own childhood memories. Yes, so far everything was

going according to the old rules. Two candle-ends burned by Kaloyan's head; the flames wavered but did not go out, there was no wind. Lion was still puzzling over the feeling of familiarity that doll evoked. Sometimes he seemed to catch a resemblance to somebody in Radeni. But it eluded him tantalisingly.

Meanwhile, the procession was approaching the well. Lion left the truck. The midday sun made his head heavy and he drank eagerly from the dark tub covered with moss and lichen. The cold well-water was like balm in that heat.

The children reached the well, laid the board with the doll across the cattle-trough and clustered round.

"You remember him?"

Lion turned his head and saw Ilinca Alcazi holding a basket of grapes in one hand, and some books tied together in the other.

"Who's that I ought to remember?" asked Lion.

"Why, Kaloyan — it was you made him," she laughed.

"What makes you say that?" Lion wondered.

"Surely you haven't forgotten?"

Amazing that I could, thought Lion. So that's why it seemed familiar. He filled his bucket from the tub and went back to the truck. Ilinca stood watching as he filled up the radiator. She was burned by the sun, freckled, small and quick as a squirrel. When she spoke her voice had the caress of a quiet wave. Ilinca had always appeared unexpectedly, whether in the village or the fields. He had always wondered how she did that. And now, by the well, she seemed to have sprung from nowhere.

"Would you like a lift as far as the club?" Lion asked casually.

Ilinca smiled gently and dimples played on her cheeks. She climbed into the cab casually, with quiet dignity. Lion

stole a glance at her, with an inner smile. Her face held something of the old lithographs. Like a lady of noble birth, passed through his mind.

Meanwhile, the children had stuck the candle-ends to the stone edge of the well and set to work sprinkling Kaloyan with water from the trough.

"Poor old Tudose," Ilinca sighed. "If he could know the honour being paid him!"

Why, yes, it's Tudose Poenaru, Lion gasped inwardly but all he said aloud was, "You know everything!"

Ilinca shot a glance at him and her dimples played again.

The children were singing in a ragged chorus.

Kaloyan,
yan!
Ask for rain to come!
Day and night let it fall,
So's the grain gets strong and tall....

Lion started the engine and let in the clutch. He knew what came next: Kaloyan would be carried down into the gully, covered with burdock leaves and wild flowers and left among the weeds. That was the end of the game. The children would go home. But then, later, some little girl who yearned for the doll would come along quietly and carry Kaloyan away. That was what always happened and would evidently happen today, too. And once more Kaloyan would come to life among the children.

In his mind's eye Lion could see the frail form of Tudose Poenaru, the eternal wanderer. He even fancied it was not clods of earth bouncing up to hit the bottom of the truck but the old man's staff striking the hard ground. He could even hear the hoarse, husky voice saying, "Laugh, enjoy life. And may you always be so gay, brothers!"

That was what he said when his mood was good, but often

he would come up to somebody and say, "What is the true meaning of man's life? What is the sense of our existence? That's what I want to know. Who can tell me?"

As he spoke he would look at people with clear, wide eyes. But nobody could pull the answer to these deep questions out of his pocket. So they would joke it off. Then old Tudose would poke among the clods of soil with his staff and smile humbly.

"Mmm'yes. The life of man — it is like the morning dew," he said and walked slowly away, looking at the ground, curved like a sickle.

Lion had often pitied the strange, unfortunate old man. Tudose Poenaru usually appeared in Radeni with the late autumn rains. He was a distant relative of the Alcazis — probably the only one of the family to be a failure and a wanderer. Where did he go, through what regions, along what roads? One thing was clear: he had no place to live, so the autumn rains and the pain in his rheumatic joints drove him to the Alcazis, who gave him a place by the stove. In addition to everything else he had the falling sickness and when it attacked him he would fall from trestle bed, stool or cart, foam at the mouth and thrash about on the ground, like a fish on dry land. People would run away, frightened, thinking he was possessed.

Lion had always wanted to know where he went in the spring, where he wandered until autumn came. Once he had imagined the sickle-backed Poenaru walking among the stars, tapping them lightly with his staff. And emptiness all round. That was when he had carved Kaloyan, the heathen idol, the god of rain, from a piece of wood and given it the likeness of Tudose Poenaru, for he, too, appeared in the village only with rain. So out of naive motives he tried to give happiness to the old man.

Lion stopped the truck by the club. Ilinca jumped down lightly, took the bag and books he handed her, and looked up at him.

"We've got a performance at the club this evening. Come along."

"I'll be there." He slammed the door.

"Don't forget, Uncle Lion," she called and waved her hand.

* * *

Lion went to the club, his shepherd's pipe tucked away in an inside pocket. Nowadays he tried to do his carving away from inquisitive eyes. He had not given up his cherished occupation but followed it in secret, in his free time.

Ever since he had come back after his three years in the army, people had found him changed. He was frowning and reserved, as though a spell had been laid on him. He had made that pipe secretly, too — he badly wanted to surprise Alexe Tymbure with it.

In former times, when his father was alive, Lion could allow himself any occupation. The father, a skilled carpenter, worked early and late, while the boy busied himself in the heap of chips or found a good moment to run off to the clay pit at the edge of the village. What did he do there? Moulded strange figures, tried to make animals and sometimes people. When he brought them home his father, a mild man, silently examined his son's work without a word of approval or disapproval. But his mother wagged her head, saying he spent all his time gallivanting around instead of taking a hoe and helping her in the kitchen garden.

Lion would push his figures into the ashes under the summer stove to dry. His mother found them there. Spitting

behind her and crossing herself, she carried the "idols" away and threw them into the gully, grumbling angrily. But in a few days Lion brought in more.

These were often not only single figures, but whole groups — simple, almost banal scenes: two cocks fighting, a colt running after a cart, a hare chased by a dog, a toboggan filled with shouting children racing full tilt down a slope. Lion's figures amused many, they would hold them and examine them, laughing and frankly wondering. The teacher Dominte Modval collected them and took them off to a room with a board over the door: "Handicrafts". And Lion's mother, too, would have ended by accepting his hobby had Aunt Kiva not flung oil onto the fire.

This "aunt" always appeared suddenly, wearing a black shawl summer and winter, clumsy and heavy as darkness itself. She brought news from all the surrounding villages. It was she who gave Lion's mother the idea that "the evil eye's been cast on the boy". And only her invocations could help in that misfortune. After that she was constantly at the gate. To get his own back, Lion found a dry hunk of walnut wood and set to work carving a female figure. He worked for over a week. But when he stood the finished figure on his father's lathe, the carpenter could hardly believe his eyes.

"Just look, it's Aunt Kiva the know-all!"

Lion's father laughed till the tears ran, while the boy stood beside him looking innocent. Then the neighbours came to look at the portrait, and within a few days the whole village had laughed to the verge of hiccups over the wooden figure. And in this way Lion got rid of Aunt Kiva.

But Saveta Alcazi no longer came either. Lion would have given much to turn the world back at least for five years. But the world obeys the laws of the Universe, as the teacher Dominte Modval always said at geography lessons.

Blue-eyed Saveta, his beloved, now lived in a new house near the mill. She had forgotten Lion and made her nest with Silvestru Belibau.

...It was an autumn morning, and mist swathed the empty meadows white with rime when they parted on the bridge across the Ikel. Fallen leaves were floating down the stream and Saveta's violet eyes were drowned in tears. It is true, neither of them thought then that the parting was for ever. They promised to put their love into letters and wait for the day when their roads would join into one. How could they guess that time would bring its own judgement? Eyes long unseen are forgotten. Nor did they know that life would never cease to confront them with new riddles. The bridge over the Ikel accompanied Lion through all the years of his army service. And now, too, a birchwood board with a picture of the bridge in poker work still hangs in Casa Mare.

At first it had been amusement, nothing more. He had moulded comical clay figures to make Saveta laugh. But what a reward he had had in her unfeigned delight! She clapped her hands, her blue eyes sparkled and her laughter was like a peal of silver bells. These moments, etched in his heart, still excited him, because memories can excite and arouse as spring arouses the earth. Sometimes your memory might seem to sleep, but it is only hiding in ambush, awaiting its moments.

Yes, everything began with simple play.

One day he found a small bird. It was a fledgling from the riverside swallows, hurt and pitiful in its helplessness. Had some mischievous boy hit it with a stone from a catapult, or a kite dropped it? Hard to say.

After his father Marin Jinga died, his mother pined day by day. She moved about the house silently, she cooked and cleaned, but a cold shadow lay in her eyes like the ice deep in

holes which even the hot midday sun cannot thaw.

When she saw the fledgling Lion had brought she said nothing but as it began to beat against the wires of the cage, she gave the boy an angry look, took the swallow out and threw away the cage. Lion had not known that a caged swallow dies. He arranged a nest on the windowsill and the bird soon became accustomed to the place. It pecked crumbs, greedily swallowed flies Lion caught in the yard, splashed in a bowl of water and chirped merrily. As its strength increased it tried to fly, but the first attempts were a miserable failure. It fluttered, and dropped. Then the fledgling began training its wings. It would cling tightly to the edge of the table or the back of a chair and work them. This went on for two or three weeks. Lion, watching, was amazed at the little bird's stubborn industry. At night it slept in a nest of rags, but as soon as day came it would peck a few crumbs, preen its feathers and set to work. The wings moved faster and faster, they were like a fan. Then it began to flutter from place to place and even circled the room once or twice. Lion rejoiced at the progress made by his protegee. Saveta too ought to see his wonder, see what could be done through love of freedom, a longing for the heights, the great spaces.

As soon as Saveta crossed the threshold she saw two birds, a living one on the windowsill, yearning for the blue sky, and another on the table, with raised wings.

"It looks just like it," Saveta laughed, picking up the swallow carefully carved in wood. "But it won't fly. It'll never fly."

Yes, it was true, he could see himself that his bird lacked the movement of flight. It looked inert. He had struggled a long time to create the impression of flight, but he had failed.

"But this one will fly," said the girl, going to the window and flinging it wide open.

The swallow started, and was still. It looked at the lofty sky, and at the ceiling. Then with tiny steps it ran along the sill to its bowl. But it did not peck food. It was intoxicated by the freshness of the air, the vastness of the space suddenly opened before it. It twittered happily, opened its wings and flew out so lightly and fast that it disappeared in an instant. It was as though it had never been here on the windowsill, in the room where only its earth-bound wooden shadow remained.

Saveta, seeing Lion's troubled look, suggested a walk.

The path ran into the woods, supple and agile as a hunted deer — into the quiet coolness where water gurgled quietly, glinting as it flowed through the grass.

"The brook's seeking its brothers," said Saveta.

Lion knew where the brook went, he had often wandered through the woods, looking for the roots and knotted pieces from which he carved his figures. When they came to his favourite glade, Saveta said as though in passing, "I love to lie in the grass and look into the sky. It feels so good!"

Lion felt embarrased for some reason and did nor reply. He watched Saveta picking blackberries. When she came up to him her cupped hands filled with the berries he tried to kiss her. But Saveta slipped away from his arms laughing teasingly.

"Saveta! Saveta!" came a piteous voice.

Saveta's little sister Ilincutsa was standing at the edge of the glade. She had a twig in her hand.

"Our Dumanitsa's lost! She was grazing right here, and then she went and lost herself." Ilincutsa sniffled.

"And what's that over there, by that stack — a magpie, maybe?" Saveta asked tartly.

Oh, that Ilincutsa! You could never hide from her anywhere. She must have seen them fooling about here and

followed them. Ilincutsa, red to the ears, dashed off to the stack, heels twinkling. Of course she had been following them.

On the way back to the village Lion talked about the places where he had found this or that fantastic root and what could be made out of them. He talked about branches scorched and broken by lightning that made him think of all sorts of shapes. Those shapes were with him day and night. And now the blackberry glade would plague him a long time.

But the girl listened absently. Birds were singing, the sun was sinking, but the lad who could see even things to which others were blind was now himself blind, and missed much which he should not have missed. The girl walked beside him, excited by running over the glade, by the fragrance of mown hay, the mysterious quietness of the forest. Her heart thudded hard. And the heartbeats often say more than the most eloquent words. Why were you so late in learning that simple truth, Lion?

During his first year in the army Lion received several letters from Saveta, but then they stopped. From Alexe Tymbure, his good friend, he heard that she had married. The big Alcazi family had seven daughters, five of them already married, leaving only Saveta and Ilincutsa. Naturally the parents wanted good husbands for their daughters, but in the village Lion was regarded as a queer sort who instead of learning a useful trade wasted his time on rubbish. No, this was no husband for pretty Saveta. Aunt Kiva's malicious tongue, too, played its part — she was an Alcazi relative, a distant one, but jealous of her connection. And after all, what good could you find to say of a young fellow who would jeer at an old woman so cruelly? And was she the only one he had offended? Quite a few worthy people in Radeni he had mocked. He would carve things that made you think of the

Evil One. Such a son for a good father to have! Marin Jinga hadn't had a head full of wind, like that son of his, he'd worked in honest sweat. Lucky for Saveta that that worthless Lion had gone to the army. Silvestru Belibau, now — he was an agronomist and respected by all. You could be proud of a husband like that — a worthy man and a hard worker. So — Saveta married Silvestru and bore him a son, a clever, sturdy little fellow, a child anyone could envy — spit for luck and preserve us from the evil eye!

Lion still kept Alexe Tymbure's letter which would have been better lost on the way. "Each must choose his own," was the concluding phrase from his friend.

* * *

Everything is subordinated to the law of equilibrium, thought Lion as he walked along the village street. Balance, symmetry and a fulcrum. But the important thing was to find that line of equilibrium, otherwise how could you give movement to sculpture?

The world has endless variety, but the whole world, the whole universe, the sun and the earth are subordinate to the law of equilibrium. And the harmony of flowers — is that accidental? Where lies the secret of perfection? Everything rests upon its axis, everything on the earth and outside it, somewhere in space.

How long had this damned thought been plaguing him? Perhaps ever since those restless, unsettled days when he was attracted to the smithy where, he thought, he might learn some hidden secret of skill. Lion watched the making of a cart. That was when he first realised that in addition to the ability to turn a wheel, a knowledge of elementary mechanics was needed. The wheel rests on an axle, and the axle is fixed

to a long pole, like the heart of the cart. The solution to all his confused thinking seemed within reach, but — it flashed like a firefly and vanished in the darkness. Or possibly those thoughts had been boring into him even earlier, at the time when the clouds in the sky seemed to be alive? Or when a girl with violet eyes had robbed him of his piece and he began to seek his fulcrum, like every other young fellow of his age? Who could say when all began?

One summer morning Lion lay in the grass, gazing up into the bottomless blue of the sky. The earth seemed to be holding its breath. A boundless ocean flowed over the hills. Then suddenly, somewhere in the dizzy height, a lark began its magic song. And this far-off little handful of life awakened the whole dumb majesty of the sky, filling it with ringing, exultant music. The sky descended to earth, and earth was unfettered, warm, breathing. To Lion it was a miracle. And this miracle had been wrought by a tiny speck barely visible in the great sky. The world acquired a new meaning.

Lion leaped up quickly, he thought he had solved the riddle.

The world and its people appeared simpler, more easily understood. True, life too was very changeable. One thing today, another tomorrow. Lion could still remember carving a girl, curved like a spring, dragging a stubbornly resisting cow on a rope. Everybody recognised Ilincutsa. And the girl, on seeing her "portrait", was utterly delighted. For some time she gave him no peace, she would hang onto the fence-posts outside his house and pester him with questions: who was he going to carve now? But Petru Lutskan, a conceited braggart (after all, he was team leader!) went purple with fury when he saw the figure which indubitably resembled himself. But that was not all; he became

transformed, that Petru. In all Radeni there had never been one so fond of speechifying. It was meat and drink to him. No meeting could pass without him climbing up onto the rostrum. And he had an invariable habit of shaking a cap clenched in his fist over his head. He made speeches not only at meetings — at weddings, too, and at funerals, at birthdays and at christenings, wherever he could find listeners, even two or three.

So Lion had carved Lutskan on a rostrum with his cap in his hand. The rostrum looked ready to collapse any moment under his heavy body, right onto the benches where trustful hearers peacefully slept.

But from the day when Lutskan saw the caricature of himself, and what was worse, heard somebody's innocent exclamation: "The spitting image of him!" the flow of words left him. He would mount the rostrum from sheer habit, pronounce a few sentences and — choke.

But as Alexe had said in his letter, "Each must choose his own," and Lion found his. Because you couldn't call all this fooling serious work. His real job was driving a truck. Lion never kept his figurines, he would give them to anyone who asked. They meant something only so long as he was working on them. Finished, shown, they ceased to be of interest to their creator, because his mind was already possessed by something else and he was in a hurry to start. Let those who liked them, keep them. If they amused anyone, the world was richer for the laughter. And if anyone was offended, that wasn't bad, either; let them know that in Radeni nobody was ridiculed without reason.

Lion never liked to make his figurine exactly like its original, he tried to show what he saw in his own way, with no fear of divergences, no striving after a portrait likeness. He wanted to bring out what lay hidden in a person's character,

to show his essential self. Forms elaborated with the help of imagination turned out weightier and more complex than the reality. Intuition, for instance, made him give Petru Lutskan an appearance quite different from the actual one. Petru was handsome, tall and slender as a fir tree. But Lion gave him a slight stoop and drooping shoulders. The thick, heavy torso, bulging eyes and outstanding ears would, one might have thought, make the wooden figure quite unlike Petru himself. Yet people at once recognised that wooden piece of ugliness and even called it "the spitting image".

A miracle, that's what it was. Lion's figures were like sparks lighting up old memories, helping one to recall a forgotten scene or a thought which once flickered in your mind but vanished before you could catch it, so that later you forgot it altogether, without following it up; but now, looking at Lion's work, you remembered everything and understood everything.

There was a time, however, when Lion dropped his hobby. He turned from the army and plunged into work. It was time to give the old people an easier life. When he came home he would busy himself about house, garden and yard, helping in every way he could. His eyes saw much, but his heart asked nothing.

It was in this state of inner emptiness that he one day met Saveta, with a comical button-nosed little fellow holding her skirt. Seeing Lion she stopped and they talked a long time about this and that, trying to avoid anything which could bring back the past. That past was left behind, far beyond the hills, like a village you try to reach until night overtakes you on the way. And when the path divides you leave the right road and now, instead of going to the village, you are leaving it father and father behind.

This was the first nudge that helped Lion shake off his

numbness. He was finally awakened by Alexe Tymbure. Lion was sitting on a bench mending a fishing net. That is something which can always come in handy for a driver; many was the time he had come home with a bucket of fresh fish. His mother was sitting on the earthen bank round the house sewing a button onto his father's coat. Alexe Tymbure sat down by Lion. He seemed to be in poor spirits. That may have come from the evening — yellow from dust, scorched with drought. It was so quiet that one could hear pea-pods splitting in the kitchen garden. All three sat in silence, far away with their thoughts. It was that kind of evening.

Alexe, descendant of Carpathian herdsmen, had brought his shepherd's pipe, which had come down to him from his grandfather, a man from North Bukovina. The old man had been cast up in Radeni by the First World War and settled down there; with him the old Carpathian songs had come to the village, and there was no better singer of these ballads than his grandson Alexe.

Lion could listen to his friend playing all night long, but the ballad he liked best was the one about a thunderstorm in the mountains at night. It began with the agitated beating of clappers.

The clappers beat on this oppressive night, too. Their sound seemed to come from the distant heights. The beechwood pipe sang to them songs born in the stern Carpathians.

Lion had been there once. The kolkhoz had sent his father to fetch building timber and he took his son along to see a bit of the world. The pine and beech woods, the gurgling rivers, the menacing ravines left an ineffaceable impression on the boy. He remembered crossing the Cheremush. A fine rain had been falling, and to him it seemed not rain at all, but

spray from the waves breaking over rocks and seething in white foam.

Later on he guessed that his father had not only wanted to show him other parts of the world; he wanted him to find a use for his clever hands, letting him see the houses built by the skilful Gutsuls. These houses, like fairy-tale dwellings, decorated with such intricate patterns that you could only gasp, would surely, the father thought, arouse a feeling for craftsmanship in the boy.

The trip to the Carpathians was in fact not wasted on Lion. The glades with their emerald grass, the crystal water of rivers, the ever-changing skies became a part of him. Even in the army, when he saw other mountains and other ravines, lakes like seas and forests that knew no ending — even then he could not forget the land which had enchanted him, where the mountain tops called to one another with the voice of the trembitas. No, it was not for nothing his father had taken him to see the world.

Alexe's pipe took him back to those distant mountains. Again he heard the sound of the forests and the voice of the rivers, heard his father's steady steps. He wanted to call to him, perhaps to ask him something, perhaps to complain — but suddenly he heard his mother's bitter cry.

"Mari-i-in!"

The pipe choked into silence. Lion rushed, frightened, to his mother. She was sobbing bitterly, her face hidden in his father's coat.

A month later Lion had made a wonderful pipe, encrusted with filigree carving; it was made in memory of the Carpathians. He presented his gift to Alexe in the club. Alexe turned it over and over, touched.

"It's a shame for you to drop your carving," he said. "Keep it up, Lion."

Sitting in a corner of the hall Lion thought sadly that he hadn't dropped his carving, it had deserted him. How could he tell his friend of his trouble? A group circled, dancing, on the stage. Lion could see that dance in wood. His eyes saw it, his mind evaluated it, but his hands lay idle on his knees.

Suddenly he saw a forest cutting on a hot summer midday. Saveta ran along it like a deer pursued by the hunter. Her dark bare legs twinkled, grass lashing the calves. Her hair floated out on the wind, her skirt was caught by it. That was how she should be carved, all movement. Speedly, light, flying.

Flying.... "It will never fly." What had that been said about? "It will never fly." There you were, the impulse had flared up, and now — nothing. All gone. His hands still lay idle on his knees.

In his room at home the swallow with the dead wings still gathered dust. Lion could not give them life. Evidently the dynamics of movement still eluded him.

You have to learn, learn how to fly. Otherwise you will never know the blueness of the sky.

In the forest Lion knew a place where — so he believed — nobody else from the village ever came; the way there was blocked by gullies and fallen trees, and by dense thickets of cornelians. There were tall old hornbeams which probably remembered the days of Peter the Great. But for Lion the great attraction was the waterfall. A brook welled up from under boulders and collected into a small pond that reflected the trees and a patch of blue sky. From this quiet pond water descended into a gully foamed and chuckled as it dashed against the stony bed, sparkling in sunshine which slanted

through thickets and sending up rainbows. The dark mouth of a cave gaped behind the waterfall. Lion had sometimes climbed into it to look at the forest and sky through the transparent curtain.

Pushing through the fallen wood one day, hearing the familiar sound of the water and feeling its cool breath, he climbed onto a tree-stump which gave him a view of the waterfall and stopped dead: a girl was standing under it. Her clothes hung pink on a bush. Laughing and squealing softly, she caught rainbow spray in her cupped hands. The water poured over her shoulders and protruding shoulder-blades and down her dark naked body. Lion could see the hollow on her narrow back, the undeveloped hips and long, slender legs.

A wood nymph, he thought with almost superstitious surprise. It seemed impossible that it could be a real girl. How had she come here? Alone, in this secluded spot? A cuckoo called in the trees and the girl turned her head, alarmed. Lion, thunderstruck, recognised Ilincutsa. So she was the wood nymph! Although he was well hidden by the branches, she seemed to be looking straight at him. She raised her hands to clear the wet hair off her forehead, turned her head on a long slender neck — Lion gasped again: a real gazelle! She rose on tiptoe, ran lightly over the boulders and vanished into the cave behind the clear waterfall. So she knows that, too, flashed through Lion's mind. He could see the vague silhouette of her slender half-hidden figure.

Cautiously, so that not a single branch rustled, Lion jumped down from his stump and went back. He did not want to disturb Ilincutsa or worse, frighten her. Clambering through the deadwood he smiled, recalling the precious gift of chance. He recalled every movement the girl had made

and the quiet murmur and laughter of the water followed him. As he walked he thought that now he too had his secret, that Ilincutsa's beauty so unexpectedly disclosed now belonged to him, too.

What would he not give to carve her in wood, so warm and living, young and lovely, filled with secret timidity and concealed movement. He would call his sculpture "The Wood Nymph".

It was dark when Lion returned home. All night long he dreamed of the sparkling curtain of water and the figure of a girl with the grace of a gazelle.

* * *

In orchards and vegetable plots autumn breathed the smoke from burning leaves. Lion hurried home after work, avoiding any encounter even with Alexe Tymbure. Till late at night a steady yellow light in the only window of his room stared out into the street. Seeing it, Alexe guessed that Lion had returned to his passion — wood carving. What's he going to surprise folks with now, Alexe wondered sometimes, but he asked no questions. When it was ready, Lion himself would show it.

That was what happened. One afternoon he saw Lion's truck by the stock section.

"I've been looking for you!" Lion called while still a good distance away. "Where on earth have you been?"

"Why, has something happened?"

"Come on, I want to show you a — something." Lion smiled happily and his eyes held a feverish glitter. "I took her out into the yard, into the sunshine."

"Who've you made now?" Alexe enquired, glancing at Lion. "Who's your unfortunate victim?"

Lion ignored his friend's teasing, he did not even hear it.

"I want you to see it first. You know, I believe I've really managed it this time. Well, get in."

Alexe shrugged and climbed into the cab. He was already used to his friend's eccentricities.

On the way Lion told him about the wood nymph he had seen by the waterfall, but refused to name the girl.

"You don't know her, she isn't from Radeni."

Now Alexe was impatient to see Lion's new work. Who could that wood nymph be, he wondered. She must have made a big impression on Lion if he had started carving again. Never before had he seen Lion so wild with delight.

As he approached the house Lion saw a crowd by the big gates and a black column of smoke. Thinking the shed must be on fire, he stopped the truck and ran into the yard. The fire was in the middle of it. Pushing gapers right and left he ran closer and stopped dead: a sculpture in wood, his "Wood Nymph", lay burning on a bundle of twigs. Nikanor Alcazi, Ilincutsa's father, was busy over the fire, purple with rage. When he saw Lion he snatched up a pitchfork. Lion did not move, he still could not take in what was happening. Petru Lutskan who was standing by Nikanor tore away the fork, held Ilincutsa's enraged father by the shoulders and tried to calm him.

"Neighbour! Neighbour! Don't take a man's life! He's touched, who d'you want a quarrel with?"

"He made my daughter a mockery all over the village and I mustn't touch him?!" Alcazi howled.

"And haven't I stood plenty from him, but I never went as far as killing. Why, everyone knows him, the zany!" Petru insisted, holding his neighbour firmly.

Lion stood watching the flames greedily eating up his best work, the best of anything his hands had ever made. Then he

saw somebody dashing water over the hot fire. Ilincutsa had sprung up from somewhere, she ran to her father screaming, "You'd better have killed me, father! What have you done, father, what have you done? How could you lift your hand to do it? You'd better have killed me!"

Nikanor Alcazi looked at his daughter with mad eyes, and only when she flew to the well with a bucket he understood something, spat with open contempt and stumped heavily out of the yard without a backward look.

"There you are, Nikanor, a daughter's gratitude!" That was the voice of Aunt Kiva rising over the yard. "You shameless hussy! In your place I'd be ready to sink through the ground! Good people, when's such a thing ever been seen, a girl shown like that, the way her mother bore her? If it was me —"

A calm bass phlegmatically cut in.

"Eh, Mother Kiva, who's ever want to show you like that?"

"Aye, that's right! No call for you to yell."

Aunt Kiva choked in mid-cry and all around guffawed. Lion awakened from his stupor and ran to scatter the fire, but of the sculpture only a charred smoking piece of wood remained. It was like a bowed figure of monk in a black habit.

People began to disperse, awkward, embarrassed before Lion. Somebody tried to console him but he did not even hear, only stood looking at the water-logged fire. Soot still floated in the air, and there was an acrid smell of smoke.

As usual, it was all Aunt Kiva's doing. Passing the Jinga house she had looked into the yard. Not a soul about. A rusty old padlock hung on the house door. Well, if nobody's at home you go your ways. But not so Aunt Kiva. She opened the wicket gate cautiously and slipped inside. If nobody was at home, it was just the time to take a good look round. Curiosity she had never lacked. And now, under a lean-to,

she saw something pale. She went closer and gasped: it was the figure of a girl carved in wood with such skill that it seemed alive. Aunt Kiva actually crossed herself, thinking of magic and spells. Then she began to wonder whom that viper Lion could have carved? This time it was rather difficult to guess. Aunt Kiva thought of this one and that, examining the sculpture first from one side, then from the other. Perhaps Ilinca? Aunt Kiva had noticed long ago that she'd had a fancy for that gawk. Maybe, then, it was her? The smile was rather like. But to make quite sure, she decided to run to Alcazi, to call the father here, and the mother too, let them decide themselves whether it was their daughter or not. Who if not father and mother could know their own child?

Aunt Kiva made at top speed for the Alcazi house, on the way telling all she met about Lion's latest trick. Alcazi ran to Lion's house with all his family and wasted little time deciding whether it was like his daughter or not. If people were saying that was Ilinca —! He brought a bundle of twigs, flung the figure on it, poured kerosene and carried a match to it. The best thing to do.

When the last gaspers had drifted away Lion looked about him, seeking his mother. She was not there. He let out a sigh of relief. A good thing she wasn't at home, he thought. As it is every trouble sets her head shaking.

Alexe Tymbure went to shut the gate. Under the acacias he saw Ilincutsa crying softly, her trembling, soot-blackened hands over her face. And Lion's mother was tenderly stroking her head.

* * *

"Uncle Lion, good day or good evening, whichever it is when you read this short letter.

"In a few hours Alexe Tymbure will be leaving for Kishinev and I sit here thinking, writing you these lines.

"I kept hoping you would come to Radeni for New Year. But you did not come even for the winter holidays. If only you would come now, when spring is at the door. Your work at the Institute of Art must take up a lot of time, you have not enough even for the road home.

"Our village is full of flowers now. However sad you feel, it is always easier when you breathe the scent of the flowering bird-cherry, the cherry and plum trees. And the forest! A green carpet sprinkled with white flowers. What a pity you are not here!

"Perhaps you like Kishinev better now — who can say? There are so many pretty girls there — choose which you want, like an apple from a basket.

"I met your mother yesterday. She misses you and does not know what to think when there is no news of you for so long.

"Uncle Lion, that autumn day when you left Radeni I was at the station too. The train stops only a short time at Bumbata, I do not know why. I wanted to say goodbye to you and wish you success in your new life and your studies. I looked for you in all the coaches but did not find you. Only the first one I had no time to look in, and now I am so sorry. Uncle Lion, it was the first coach you were in, wasn't it?

"I felt so dreary alone on the empty platform. There was a cold north wind, I remember. So many new railway stations are being built, but at Bumbata there is still the old one, nothing is changed.

"When I came out of the station some fools came round me. But they had got the wrong girl. 'Now then,' I told them, 'either you get out of the way or I'll whistle for a militiaman!' And what do you think, Uncle Lion? I only had to whistle once and all those wolves were gone as though the wind had taken them. (I always carry a whistle with me, the one you made for Saveta to lure the birds in the woods.)

"It was dark when I got to the village, but I was just in time for the beginning of the concert in our club.

"Uncle Lion, allow me to send you a secret parcel with Alexe Tymbure. Ilincutsa Alcazi."

The letter hastily scribbled in pencil seemed unfinished. With unexpected curiosity Lion picked up a packet firmly tied up with string. From a pile of paper he drew out an old friend — Kaloyan. He had the same untroubled smile, and his green button-eyes still looked placidly out on the world. His hands still gripped the dogwood staff suitable for long journeys over the world.

SERAFIM SAKA

*Hammer and Stone, Sing to Me**

The water of our river flows with a lazy quietness, but sometimes its waves are seized with rage, they rush at the banks, take big angry bites at the rocky walls and fall back into the main current, only to rise again with surging fury, beating against the rocks, breaking and crumbling them.

From long-past ages these rocks have clung to the steep drop, gazing on moonlit nights into the mirror of the water, on sunny days into the mirror of the sky. The water washes against them day and night, morning and evening, winter and summer. It breaks its anger against the silence of the rocks and for a moment lies quietly. It wants yet does not want to wash them away, to carry off the traces of so many generations, the wounds of so many wars.

The water kisses the bank, leaving as a memory two shells like tears, then again joins in the whirling circle and flows away, flows away for ever.

Since long ages the hammer of time has been beating within us, and the echo bears into the distance the pain of the stony quarry. From morning to night the blows resound, then die away. The stone is dead and the flowers fade before they bloom.

Such are memories. Time has erased them. Except for Toma, Grandad Toma, who alone cherishes them. His hand is long dead, only the memories live. Many years of life have

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* © Translation into English. Progress Publishers 1976

left their traces on his face. The years cry out and Grandad Toma tries to calm them.

"Speak in turn or I can't hear you! Well, what do you want, eighteen?"

Eighteen is silent. What it should want it had wanted, what it should do it had done. Toma asked fifteen, but it too gave no answer. Fifteen was busy, working, breaking down the stony banks, opening them up to the sun. The years are silent, and Toma feels their weight upon him.

He could have gone on pension long ago, but from the time he lost his hammer, his eyes were clouded; and from that time he did not want to heed any counsel, or to take note of mockery and hurtful words.

Perhaps he was held here at the quarry by his sons, who had not become the craftsmen he had wished to see them?

Or was he held by memories rising now and then from the depth of the river and floating to the surface?

Who held him there? Who?

If he had been silent by nature....

If he had not once liked talking to people....

If they had not remembered what miracles he had worked, the powerful words he had had against trouble and sickness, how he had driven them from the village....

If only — eh, grandad Toma!

Long ago he had found a companion in his silence. And him too people called Toma. That which takes place on earth, cannot in the earth be hidden.

"What is the hardest of all, Toma? To crush the stone or to trim it?"

Toma sought an answer from the stone. The stone was silent, and Toma said, "Why do you think I find it hard? To crush it is not hard, and to trim is not easy. The stone gives you no peace."

One time he trimmed a slab and laying it carefully aside thought: My lads'll come back some day from the great world.... But you rest awhile, Toma. You'll take the same shirt in the next world....

But the other Toma heard and said: Have you forgotten that a man comes to this earth with no shirt on?

Old Toma frowned, turning the words over in his head, and again set to work trimming the slab.

"Hey there! Get out of the way — you hear me? The excavator's got to pass!"

"Which Toma are you talking to?" He looked for a long time at the excavator and added, "And can't you go round? The earth's big!"

"This is my road, and no call for a lot of talk!"

"M'yes, the chip doesn't fall far from the trunk. If there's a trunk there'll be chips. They're like the parent, he leaves them his character."

Toma wagged his head sagely, but the excavator could not understand and the young fellow shouted from the cab, "And what else would he leave me? All my father had was his character!" He laughed loudly but Grandad Toma got as cross as a child and frowned more darkly. "When I look at you, young fellow, I wonder where you learned so quick to talk like a book."

"Come on, don't hold me up. I've got a plan to carry out just like everyone else."

Toma moved over, but without too much haste.

"And whose might you be, eh? All of a rush!"

But then the other Toma remembered Gheorghe Kornu. "Over the river the partisans should be passing. At night the Germans ran, and nobody held the village. But who could tell for sure, maybe they'd gone, maybe not. Gheorghe heard of it, he collected all the fishermen, all the boats and brought

the partisans here to Bessarabia. And the next night he vanished."

Grandad Toma stopped trimming the slab, rolled it over to the side and fell into thought, forgetting that stone too will break if thrown down ruthlessly.

Grief there was in the village that day. And that hustler — isn't that his son? Aye, that he'll be.

A truck drove up to collect the stone waste: it waited a little, then hooted and the driver shouted loudly, to rouse the old man.

"Hey there! Think a truck's supposed to wait for everyone to scratch his head? Can't you hear?"

"What's there to hear? I can hear what I need...."

"Call the stevedores. What can you and me do?"

"If it was but you I have to think of...."

When the truck started he called mentally after it: don't come so often. You disturb me....

But soon another excavator appeared, then other trucks, and they all wanted to pass just where Grandad Toma was working, where he was reluctantly trimming a huge stone slab.

"Hey up! Hey up! Clear the way!"

The excavator had its own job, it was in a hurry to take away all Toma's thoughts and memories. Eh, but I'm tired of all this rush, he thought, for he had forgotten what he had been thinking before the excavator arrived. Yes, he had lost his hammer. He started looking for it, he dug with his hands among the stones, the clods of soil, the rubbish. He was tired with the search, blinded by dust, deafened by the noise.

Darkness came, and that day the road home was twisted. The road home. He went without his hammer. He swung his arms and whistled. Free!

The nights were long, longer. He never closed his eyes, he did not want to sleep. Ah youth, youth. There had been times when he could have slept all day if he'd wanted.

Till midnight he thought about village people who were dead. There were a great many. Count as he would, he couldn't get the count right. He started over again. Without the dead, he thought, there would have been none living. They would never have opened their eyes, they would have remained blind pups.

He waited for morning as he had once, long ago, waited for the evening to wash away the dust and noise of the quarry. But morning was still far off, and on one of these nights he rose, went over on tiptoe (although there had been nobody else in the house for a long time) to the stove which was still warm from the evening, and set on a mug of water — he had decided to warm it and shave. His face was thickly stubbled, he had felt the bristles all night pricking the pillow, the blanket, his fingers. He felt ashamed — to have come to this!

His mustache he did not touch, it reminded him of the time when he would have given anything for such a fine manly mustache. But now — look at it, white, fluffy — what could you do with it? It hung limply like a broken toy. He twisted the ends and smiled. He looked into the mirror and seemed for a moment so young that all he needed was a good jacket to look exactly like that other Toma. But had there once been a Toma like this in the village? He quickly shook off the thought. He went to the trunk and took out a new jacket. The top buttons were loose, he stitched them on firmly, so that they would hold a long time. He put the jacket on and did not recognise it. Grandad Toma had dried up but the jacket had stayed the same. But it was quite new — there were a few marks from the damp but essentially as new as

though it were just made. It must have grown, surely, since he had worn it last. He picked up the bag in which he took his dinner to the quarry, looked at it and felt angry. What a fool he had been, half a lifetime he had taken it to work, he'd only changed the fastenings a few times and that was all. It was old, that bag, and he felt sorry for it. But he quickly cast that thought aside. He got busy, packing food from the evening into the bag. It was cold so he held it in his hands a little to warm it. But that didn't help, it was still cold.

He left the house and walked quickly along one lane, then another, taking the shortest way to the quarry. If any had seen him now, in those clothes, the bag over his shoulder and no hammer in his hand they would have thought he'd taken leave of his wits. Luckily nobody saw.

The quarry was sunk in its early-dawn sleep. Dawn hadn't yet come. A black, dreadful precipice yawned almost at Grandad Toma's feet. Some weeks back he had lost his hammer here.

Toma took the food from the bag and laid it out on a smooth slab which he turned over with great difficulty. It was smeared with soil, he wiped it with his sleeve and saw a cross chiselled on it. He looked at it as though it were not he who had made it, then he bent, breathed a few times — perhaps to warm it, perhaps to blow away the remaining soil.

In the west the cliffs were silent, in the east the water raced eternally along the valley. Behind him the sun was rising. He felt hungry and feared he might not have enough. I'm like a child again, he thought, as his hand reached out of itself to the table. But he didn't break any piece off. Sleep suddenly swept over him, deep and quiet. I'll lie down, Toma. And you — do not be silent, sing me a song! Hammer and stone, sing to me. Do not be silent or I shall not sleep....

Round him birds sang to greet the day. They would have alighted on the table but they feared the man. He's pretending, they thought, pretending to be asleep.

The water of our river flows with lazy quietness, but sometimes its waves are seized with rage, they rush at the banks, take big angry bites at the rocky walls and fall back into the main current, only to rise again with surging fury, beating against the rocks, breaking and crumbling them.

ARIADNA SHALAR

*A Man Among People**

It was whispered in the village that he had a lot of money—like the grain you scatter for chickens. But whether that was true nobody really knew. And it was no easy matter to make sure because people saw him only twice a day, mornings and evenings, when he passed through the village with a clucking sack on his back. It was so heavy he could hardly carry it, and stuffed full of the devil knew what. Clucking and quacking came from it, and sometimes there would even be a shrill "cock-a-doodle-doo!" People crossed themselves and got quickly out of the way, to stare from a distance at this crazy fellow's sack.

That wouldn't have mattered so much, queer as it was, if only the rude fellow had answered greetings. Greetings? You never even saw him where people were gathered, he went neither to church nor to merrymakings. He did not even have stock in his yard. And stock, like children, can often be a bridge to link people. But he cared nothing for anybody, he might as well have been deaf and dumb. Nobody even knew what his faith was. Even that could have been forgiven him. But to get no reply to a civil "good morning"? Or to be answered by clucking from the sack and have a young goat or a rabbit jump out right under your nose? The villagers were just as inquisitive as anybody else, they badly wanted to know what kind of man he was, where he was

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born, why he had come, and from where. But it was all sunk in mystery.

They began to watch him, and saw onions and garlic in his kitchen garden. The garlic spears were thick, and the onion spears were green and juicy although the summer had been hot and dry. Some said he watered his garden at night when everyone was asleep, others that he mixed poultry droppings with the water to mulch the soil where those excellent onions and garlic grew. But if so, why had nobody ever seen him watering, or carrying droppings from the henhouse? He dug a well in his yard, and that too had its riddle. He dug it under a century-old walnut tree between the maize barn and the wood-pile. Folks said he made it without logs, he didn't line it at all. Instead of logs and a lining, he put a millstone over it. With a hole in the middle.

"When he came to our village," the old men said, "he'd got naught save a staff." "A staff, a boy, a girl and a bag of money," others added. "No moneybag, only a staff. And the boy and girl, tiny like kittens. He carried both of them on his back. And the staff in his hand." There wasn't a person in the whole village who wasn't eaten up with curiosity about this stranger. And since nothing, or practically nothing, was known about him for certain, the wildest suppositions were rife. Some said he'd killed someone and was hiding. Others, that he'd killed his own wife, then sold everything — land, stock and buildings, bribed his way out of prison and got himself as far away as possible, to leave all sins behind. What didn't they say, what didn't they invent! He was a thief, a robber, he was the chief of a robber band and had run away from them taking all the stolen wealth. His age caused no less conjecture. He looked too old to be the father of two mites like those, barely weaned, you might say. But — all his

secrets were hidden behind his fence as securely as a needle in a haystack.

Incidentally, at first the mysteries were fewer. A queer sort of stranger dropped from the skies into the village with its orchards and wattled fences, and that was all. Then details began to emerge: he always carried the small boy and girl in a sack on his back. And the last thing they learned about him was his name — Mikhail. The name sounded Christian. But as time passed the mysteries grew. They multiplied with every day. Where had he got the money to buy the plot of land? Apart from two smudge-faced brats he hadn't a thing.

The goodwives were sure there was something unholy about it all. The children were as queer as he was. They never cried, they were never seen in the street, they didn't even go to the gate to look out like other children did. And who'd ever heard of such small children, knee high to a grasshopper, never making noise? Who'd ever known children who didn't run out into the street, make friends, play with the other little 'uns or run across the road to the cemetery, a couple of steps away, to eat the funeral sweetmeats?

The stranger, however, kept his secrets to himself, like the hens, kids and rabbits he carried out in his sack to graze every morning on his weary back. After buying the plot with a rickety abandoned shed, he got another twenty hundredths of land sowed to lucerne. When had he managed to buy this parcel of lucerne land? When had he got those chickens? What did he do with those durned birds, with the goats and the rabbits? What restless imp made him carry them in his sack to the pasture outside the village and have them feed there all day, as though they were sheep or something? Nay, he'd be calling down misfortune on the whole village with his unchancy ways, devil take him!

Time passed and more of the men started making guesses. That was when the hermit bought for a song a sandy section riddled with fox and badger holes. Only at the bottom of a deep gully washed out by the rains were there a few consumptive elm twigs. But up the sides — hardly a blade of grass. Not even the wild apricots and thorn bushes that can grow from bare stones had taken root there. The section was known in the village as Gawks' Hill and every goodman was glad enough to get rid of his share and with it the need to pay taxes on foxes' and rodents' dens:

"Bought a hole in a bread-ring, the gaby!"

There were plenty ready to jeer. But there were also those who scented a trick. "Don't you be taken in," they said. "He isn't such a gaby. He didn't buy it to sell sand to the devil's imps. He's got something in his head." And one sage fellow who had worked some years at a tavern in town and learned a thing or two said for all to hear that it sometimes happened if a man lived after his own rules and followed them, everyone thought he was crazy and hadn't any rules at all.

The sage fellow slept peacefully in his bed at night, dreaming of the meals he had been serving to customers at the tavern for long years, while the other men were watching every step taken by the loony. They wanted to know what he was going to do with that sandy hill. This was not difficult, because everyone could see when he went there and when he left it. But everything else was a deep mystery.

Until he surrounded his plot of land with a fence thickly woven of reeds and thorn branches with a wooden cap running along the top, he could be seen sitting on the earthen bank round the house. He would sit under the window eating maize cakes with onions or garlic, and his children sat and ate with him. But once it was fenced off nobody could see into the yard. The fence was finished off with tow inside and

hops wound round the big gate, so the yard was as isolated as monastery grounds.

Meanwhile, the stranger dug himself a keeping cellar. A dugout. But nobody saw the earth he threw out, just as nobody had seen the clay from his well. Neighbours decided that he had mixed the clay with straw to smear the shed, and used the soil from the dugout to bank the house up higher.

"He's likely one of them as says their prayers in the cellar!"

"You know what? That boy rocks himself to sleep! He sits there with his arms round his knees and dozes for hours!"

The men said one thing, the goodwives another. The women folks' heads went round, so much there was that was amazing.

"Holy Mother of Christ! What way's that? Childer hardly weaned and he feeds them onions and garlic! And they never even cry!"

"Eh, that's naught. They eat maize bread, too!"

"Eh, dear Lord! The things you let happen! Even them as is grown can howl wi' it all!"

It is said one fool can ask more questions than a hundred wise men can answer. Nobody knew whether this queer stranger was in his right mind or not, but he was sending the whole village crazy — that was a fact! The neighbours burned with curiosity. The old women crossed themselves, the old men spat over their left shoulders — because all this was no joke. Nobody had ever seen this man named after the archangel Michael buying salt or kerosene at the village shop. Nobody had met him trading at the market. Yet surely he ought to make something out of his poultry and rabbits as other folk did? His hens alone were enough, and the rabbits multiplied all the time in the lucerne. Eyes are given to use. It

did not pass unnoticed that the sacks of poultry and rabbits carried by the stranger to the pasture grew more numerous every year. In time he had so many that he could carry them out to feed in freedom only on Sundays and holidays, the rest of the time he brought sacks of lucerne home for them.

These changes kept the village busy. However much the neighbours tried to be ahead of him by getting up early, it was no good. Only those who rose with cock-crow got any satisfaction at all: in the early mist they could see the hermit making for home, carrying a sack stuffed with lucerne.

Then one fine day they discovered that he had no more goats or kids! This news was hard to believe, still harder to test.

"How's that — none at all?" The whole village was excited. "Maybe he's got fruit trees grown and fears the goats'll strip the bark?"

"Oho-ho! He's not got any kids!"

When any news is heard one usually goes and asks the person whom it concerns the what and the how of it. But how can you ask a crazy man? You can guess what you wish, but you'll never learn the truth. Even if you don't believe the gossip, it still leaves a doubt like the itch, crawling under your skin, irritates a desire to smoke when there's no tobacco.

Things went on without any change, until the rumour spread about a golden goat. Nobody could find out where it originated. But soon all knew that a wonderful goat with golden horns emerged from the hermit's dugout at night. The spectre moved silently about the yard, clambered up on the earthen bank and thrust its nose against the window. After having in this way told the master it was there, it went to the well and waited for water.

"He's a counterfeiter, mark my words! I've heard tell about one o' them. And he'd got a sheep with gold horns in his cellar, too. They found him out in the end, he was making false money. They took him off and that was the end of it. His bones rotted in jail."

The senseless gossip grew like a rolling snowball. Children were afraid to pass the "wizard's" house after dark. If their parents sent them for kerosene, salt or what-not, they walked in the very middle of the road where wheels sank to the hubs in mud. There were adults still more timorous. A man would flog the guts out of his horse, driving it through sticky mud or by roundabout ways to avoid the uncanny house.

There were trifling incidents that would have passed without note in any other place; but if a polecat jumped out of the woodpile in the hermit's yard, or a rat slipped out of the barn, everybody took fright and ran as though crazed. And blamed him for it, too.

"I used to think this way and that, but now — you could cover me wi' gold before I'd set foot in his yard!"

"Oho! You'd go if he sent for you! You're good at whitewashing, mebbe he'll be wanting to whitewash his shed. Then you could find things out!... And tell us!"

The men heard the women's talk but said nothing, thinking that the hermit had smeared his shed with clay himself, whitewashed the walls and levelled off the earthen bank round the house with a spade. You wondered whether he ever heard what they said about him. Or didn't he hear anything? Did he know how folks watched him? He couldn't be quite unaware of the avid curiosity, because unable to find out what happened in his yard, people had taken to hovering round when he was working in the field where he could not help seeing them, watching him cut runners from the vines

villagers threw out in the gully. He could not help see riders rein in their horses, and those on foot standing a long time holding their hoes by the sandy hill where he was planting vines.

The day he started to plant those vines, it was the talk of the village.

Everyone knew how vines were always planted: everybody helped, they harnessed two or three pairs of oxen to one plough, cut deep furrows in the autumn-chilled soil, and then in spring, when the ground was soaked with snow-water, they all came together to the vineyard, dug holes and set the cuttings. But what was this daftie doing? He did not plough his sandy hill. He did not even harrow it. He did not even dig holes. He drove the village mad with curiosity, because he didn't do things the proper way at all. He went to his hill with a sack of cuttings and string. With the bone end of his staff he bored holes in the unprepared soil and pushed the cuttings from green immature vines into them as though they were pegs! Aye, he'd be eating grapes and drinking wine — in his dreams! Only black thorn on boundaries and willows by the streams could be planted like that, by making holes with a stick. And seedlings were set out this way in kitchen gardens. But there was none to give good counsel, and none to hearken to it, either. The hermit toiled from dawn. When the heat came he was still there in his vineyard like a stork that had lost its mate on a swamp. His head wound round with a white cloth, he worked with his hoe, turning up the ground between the rows.

"Aha! Easy digging, and getting the harvest it'll be easier yet," people said, as they looked at his hoe shining in the sunshine. No hoes shone anywhere else. Only here, on the arid sand, his rose and fell, reflecting the sunshine like a mirror.

"Well, if he grows vines on that sand — huh! It'll mean we're all loonies — naught else!"

Some preferred not to wait for the grape harvest, they wanted the parish to buy the section adjoining the hermit's for the priest without any delay, putting that part of the village under sacred protection so that people would not be afraid to go there. The priest, however, had his wits about him. The section was too small for his ambitious plans. Besides, he would have as neighbour an unbeliever who never kissed his hand, and let his dogs off the chain on church holidays. You could never go to this heretic's house for a candle or for red Easter eggs. So the sexton gabbled something about the section where the parish wanted to put the priest's house being small and cramped and poor. Otherwise, he, the good Father, would have paid no attention to the quirks of some half-wit. No such great matter, nobody lives by favour of his neighbour!

It seemed there were some who liked the talk about the wizard and his golden goat, because many laughed significantly when the sexton told them how at Easter time the hermit had tossed a head of garlic and a piece of cold maize bread into the priest's bucket instead of eggs and money.

"And didn't the priest say aught to him?"

"He just laughed."

"And that crazy loon? Didn't he say aught?"

"Aye, that he did. He said, 'I eat it, Father, and you can, too!' "

"Eh deary me! Well, one thing you can be sure, he'll never set foot over his door-sill again!"

"Who?"

"Why, the priest, who else?"

"Not much loss!"

Some kept hanging round the sexton and pestering him with their questions: what had the wizard got there in his yard? What did the children do? What did the freak say? Hadn't his voice got rusty with disuse? Or maybe he'd lost his speech altogether?

"They say his boy's quite big now."

"Aye, he takes the boy to the fields. And they work together in the vineyard."

"But the girl, no one's seen her."

"I heard tell the wine from his grapes burns if you warm it up on a stove. First foam froths up two fingers' thickness, and then it burns!"

"Eh, let be, brother. Anyway, he's made us look daft with his vineyard! Think — the harvest he got! But why doesn't he ever sell wine?"

"But that girl, he never lets her out of the house. They say she's grown and got fat as a cow. The house shakes when she walks about in it."

"Sexton says she's a chin like a bull's dewlap."

"That's likely the way they grow where he comes from. That sort o' breed."

"Agh! It's because she doesn't do any work. If she used a hoe you'd see what she'd be like!"

"But the lad, they say he's real handsome. More like a forester from Bukovina than one of our lads."

"Naught but trouble with a handsome lad!"

"And with a pretty maid? — isn't there trouble and to spare? If the parents are poor?"

"Nay, that's quite a different thing. Girls live their lives out, but handsome lads die unmarried."

"That's just a tale! Them dies as is fated to die."

"It's what the old men say. Handsome lads dry up quicker than dew!"

* * *

In March, when driving blizzards raged and the trees creaked in pain, all learned the name of that queer fellow's son: Grigore. The village girls looked their fill at him, so did the lads leaving with him for the front. It was the lads who learned his name.

Grigore came to the army assembly point with a big white pack — white as the snow drifted over the ruins of the village Soviet, and looked about him apprehensively. He certainly was tall and slender, with a pale forehead, more like a picture than a flesh-and-blood man. This is how they paint Carpathian foresters, mountaineers and shepherds — cheeks rosy as the crust of fresh bread, brows gleaming like fir branches on a snow-covered glade, and new young mustaches, likewise gleaming. His skin was white and his hair, brows and mustaches black. Against the whiteness of his skin they seemed to be lighter, to have a bluish tinge, just like a coloured picture painted against a pure white background.

Old Mikhail, his father, waited to see them set off. He looked very tired, he could hardly raise his eyelids heavy from sleepless nights. When he sat down, or rose from the bench, he seemed to hate the very movements. He was like an empty sack, strengthless, lifeless. It was evident that the turmoil irritated him. He pressed himself against the wall, gave up his place on the bench to someone else, and waved the tobacco smoke from his face with his hand and the sleeve of his shaggy coat.

He accompanied his son only to the edge of the village. He did not go to the forest like everyone else, nor did he come later to town with a jug of wine, like most of these seeing sons off.

After a couple of days, they say, he actually abandoned his plot and went off into the forest to dig up stumps. Some said he had built himself a shanty on a cleared section. And made a stove of stones. He chopped off pieces of frozen bread and thawed them out on the embers. And he boiled wine in a trough gouged out of the thick trunck of a lime tree. He would put the trough on the fire and fill it with wine. When the trough became hot, when the juice of the lime began to hiss at the edges, then the wine began to warm, threw up a fine pink froth and bubbled slightly.

"He works like a madman! But that heifer of his, all she does is bake buns. Her stove never cools!"

"Aye, in weather like this when you wouldn't turn a dog out of doors — eh, Holy Mother, how good buns taste!"

"Especially if you wash them down with that half-wit's red wine!"

"What I've heard tell — is it true he lends out money at interest, to grow?"

"Who knows what he does! Go to the forest and ask him!"

"Since his son's gone, they say he's got real wild!"

Winter scatters the snow, spins, dries the yarn, and knits it up, but winter is a good time for talk, too.

When the men left the yards, the womenfolk found it easier to probe some of the secrets which rose from the chimney with its smoke. Neighbours trod a trail to the house. They came with distaffs thrust under their belts to keep the heifer from being too dull all alone. They returned home with empty spindles and spinning not begun, but filled with wine to the throat. They even lost their galoshes in the snow drifts.

In the evenings the girls from the whole neighbourhood collected to spin and knit. One day lads with grey in their beards and an imp under their ribs tried their luck. In they

came, uninvited, to try buns, but made off at once. They almost put their eyes out on the bare branches in the orchard. The girls who had been present made the village ring with it. And it all happened because that crazy hermit had brought a wild goat home from his cultivated forest glade. He had found it in the forest, the girls said, right in a thicket, half-frozen and weak with hunger. It was a late kid, no bigger than a hare, with four dark strips down its back. It looked as though someone had tried to spear it on a fork and missed his thrust so that the tines just scraped along the back. It happened that only the women and girls who lived nearby knew about the goat. Well, when those bearded lads burst into the entry, drawn by the smell of buns, the wild goat made a frightened leap for the outer door. That was enough for our heroes with their iron staves; they made off wildly in all directions. The girls laughed till they collapsed and sent stinging jests after them — too much for you, those soldiers' iron rods, too heavy to lift, you've not grown up to them, got weak lying around like gabies! But the hostess herself, they said, was badly put about. She went running out after them in just a thin blouse, so fat and meaty that everything about her shook, and called after them to come back. Before that nobody had ever heard her call loudly and all marvelled to hear her weak voice, like the squeak of a baby. Returning, she burst into unrestrained tears. She wept, fed the goat from her hand, and kept talking about how lonely she was in this village. The girls stopped their fooling and clustered round, trying to comfort her and whispering caressing words in her ear.

That evening the neighbours learned that her mother had died of the same sickness she suffered from. The doctors had told her father that if he didn't want the same thing to happen to the children he ought to take them away

somewhere else, where the drinking water was different. That was what he had done. He came to live here, closer to the forest, to the mountain streams.

"Oh! At first it was all so good. Dad never talked to anyone but us. He did everything he could. He dug a well for us. He never spent his warmth on others, he brought it all home for us, only for us."

The blizzard raged outside. It gnawed at the walls and spat at the windows. Inside everything was warm and cosy. But the girl cared nothing for the warmth and cosiness in her unhappiness.

"Then when he saw I was swelling up like as if I'd got yeast in me, and could hardly move for fat, he cried, and he said to me, 'Live, my daughter, and enjoy all that is good in life for as long as you can, I did everything I could, now there is no more I can do. And no one I can fight for you!' After that he took Grigore to sleep with him, and asked him to lay his hand on his father's chest. My brother's been used to sleeping that way since he was little. But when he grew to be a big lad he got shy about keeping his hand on his father's chest. All the same, when they went to bed he'd first stroke dad's chest and then sleep like a log. Now he's at the front. He doesn't write often. Or maybe the letters just don't come, who knows? And Dad, he thinks of naught else but those letters. When he comes from the forest he chops wood for me, and gets in water, and brings flour down from the loft. He brings me all I need. Even wine from the cellar. And he always says the same thing. 'Live, my dear daughter. All I could do I have done. And there's none I can fight for you.' Then he takes a bite to eat and back into the forest. But once I heard him talking to himself, about his ill fortune. 'The pain,' he said, 'there's naught else can dull it but hard work. Only when I mow it dulls a bit. But the mowing season is

short. And there's naught else I can do,' he said. 'Not even if the whole village judges me ill. You can get as tired chopping out stumps as you do mowing, you forget your woes and you can sleep.' Then he saw me and was right startled. I'd been thinking he was talking with one of the neighbours. But he was talking with himself. And after that he stopped being wary of me. He just didn't notice me. Even when I'm sitting opposite, he talks to himself about the farm work, gives himself advice, asks himself questions and answers them himself. And there's times he talks to my brother. Takes counsel with him just like as if he was here with us.

"If only I could hear Dad singing," she added, "or even when he'd get right drunk and be angered with me and my brother. Because it's us have spoiled his life. I know he likes gaiety. If he comes from the forest and hears you're all singing, he'll stand there under the window the whole evening long, doesn't even go into the house."

When spring came, bringing more letters from the front — they filled the postman's bag till it bulged — the stump digger sometimes appeared among the old men, women and children, hoping for a letter from his son.

"Will you treat me to a glass of wine, Grandad Mikhail?" the postman would ask, laughing, if he had a letter for the old man. But then, seeing him trembling with excitement, he would quickly hold it out. He knew that whenever he passed the house he was invited in for a mug of wine, the old man himself called him in. He dropped whatever work he was doing, climbed down from the haystack or the roof he was thatching — stopped everything and hurried away to bring wine. And he never asked, as others did, "What's the news?" because he did not like to poke into other people's affairs, he was accustomed to keeping out of them and tried to spare a man empty talk.

He had taught the villagers much. Nobody wondered now to see the stack of stumps he had dug up looking from a distance like the wall of a house, carefully constructed from unplastered stones. No passer-by stopped his horse to marvel at the sharp-topped haystacks he made. And straw or hay bought from him was always fresh as the yolk of a new-laid egg. He laid those stacks so firmly that you couldn't get a fork into them. That was why he was the first to introduce the custom of chopping straw or hay from a stack with an axe. The constant gossip which had filled the village about him and his children began to evaporate. Out of all the ideas about him which had formed in the villagers' minds over the years only one remained: "He's like that because he's miserly!"

"If a man's a good husbandman, if he wants to be no worse than others and isn't lazy we just call him miserly," Tudose's widow Agafia put in a word for him one day. "And make out that his hands shake when he gives charity in pious memory, and that he treats you to goat's milk-cheese — what you can get out of a bottle, and that he's this and he's that!"

Agafia had been Mikhail's neighbour for a long time, and always said the old man respected her because nobody could overtake her at the reaping. About that he was right, folks said about Agafia that she'd no bones in her back, and it never ached, and in general nobody could do like she could at harvest time. That was something everyone knew. Her dead husband Tudose, a snarling old man whose chin was adorned with two hairy warts, had sometimes abused her in the fields for making a mock of him in people's eyes. They would start reaping their two halves of the field at the same time, and then she would leave him behind and people would laugh. But in a village where everyone knows everyone else, the most

trifling thing can grow into a tough problem, especially if you take up somebody's defence. Everyone knows how that ends — you have to defend yourself against all kinds of interpretations and gossip.

Agafia did not escape this. More and more often, as chance arose, people would start probing.

"So you've decided to get wed to him, have you?"

"And why'd we be getting wed? What are you thinking of?"

"Eh, just — I heard tell he comes visiting you."

"Well, so he comes. And why shouldn't he?"

"Strange, it is."

"What's strange about it?"

"Why, that he comes."

"Well, and what if he does?"

"But what does he come for?"

"Go and ask him!"

"Aye. I wonder!"

"What do you see to wonder about?"

"That he comes, but doesn't stay."

"That's what I tell you, he comes."

"Every evening?"

"Eh, drat you! Well, yes."

"What does he talk about?"

"He doesn't talk."

"You don't say! How's that — doesn't talk?"

"Like that. Doesn't, and that's all."

"So he just stands there propping up the door-post, and you don't even know what he wants?"

"But I've told you — he comes to play with my grandson!"

Agafia told everybody about the queer ways of her neighbour. She seemingly found nothing wrong in boasting that such a quiet, decent man, and a good husbandman

whom none in the village had been able to tame had taken a liking to her. But many questions she could answer only with a shrug. And the most inquisitive grew bolder, trying to drag out all details of what and why. "What does he say when he comes?" Her answer, that he had never said a word about getting wed, did not quench the neighbours' curiosity. "After all, why shouldn't they wed? And if they've got it settled, what are they feared of, to be making a secret of it? And at their age!" Or maybe it wasn't Agafia old Mikhail wanted to marry, but her daughter? Nothing to hide there, either. He was much older, of course. But Agafia's daughter — well, you wouldn't see the young chaps fighting over her! She had not guarded her maidenhood and had brought home a bastard. Who'd marry her now? Only some bit of old gristle. And if it was one younger, he'd be throwing the child up at her all her life!"

It was worst of all for Agafia's daughter. As it was, the village looked askance at her because of the bastard, and again tongues were busy with her name. They had begun to forget about her, and now — more talk. And the gossip became more malicious. He might be a wizard but this young woman had got him tied hand and foot and brought him a bastard for a dowry. H'm! Who'd ever have thought it? Pretended to be a hermit, the old fox, and look at the wickedness he'd got into his head! That girl had loosed the silent old fellow's tongue!

Plenty of talk like this, and every other kind, went round the village. And it would have continued a long time if trouble had not come to Agafia's house. It opened many eyes, and many it reminded that he who talks too much takes a sin upon his soul. It happened at the end of autumn. Agafia's grandson, the bastard, fell from the stove bunk right onto the hot slab and burned his whole back badly. Women came

from all round about to fuss over the poor child with jars and bottles containing every kind of ointment and infusions from various herbs. Suddenly old Mikhail flew into the house like a falcon, pushed the women away to all sides and snatched the child from them. The mother wept and screamed at him to give back her child. She had quite forgotten that this child had brought her nothing but grief, born unwanted as it had been. She tore her hair in agony and ran after the old man screaming at the top of her voice, regardless of everybody.

"It wasn't from your Grigore I had him! He isn't yours! My son! His father'll come back from the front and you'll know! He isn't from Grigore!"

The old man's action did not surprise the villagers too much. Anyone would help in such trouble. But all were thunderstruck, and talked only in whispers when two days later they learned what strength of spirit he had shown. He had walked day and night without a stop, carrying the child to town. He went as the crow flies, over the fields, covered more than a hundred kilometres. "Only true grief could give a man such strength," people said.

"Oh dear Lord! Better if she hadn't poisoned his life! She ought to have kept quiet, the fool girl! There's times, a holy lie means more than blind truth!"

Some blamed the postman — it was from him Mikhail had heard that his grandson, the son of Agafia's daughter, lived just across the street.

"He lied for a mug of wine and never blinked! And now there's a man in torment."

"M'yes. At his age. To make a journey like that!"

"Folks say Agafia's daughter's legs gave out half way there. She couldn't keep up with Mikhail!"

"No marvel! If he takes a thing into his head, he does it!"

"And we treated him like foreigner. Because we didn't know the kind he is."

"We're all like that. Always want to seem wiser than we are. Look at us, good folks, see how fine we are!"

"And then, that postman! The thing he's thought up!"

"And what'd you have done in his place? Easy to judge other folk. I'd like to see what you'd be looking like, coming all summer long with a death paper in your bag! How'd you look the old man in the face?"

"But that's no way, either. Trying to sweeten grief with a lie."

"If he could have thought of aught else, he'd have said it."

"Now he's taken that death paper to the village Soviet. Shamed to face the old man. Or maybe sorry for him? None but him knows."

"Sorry for him or not — the old man'll come back from the hospital and another sorrow on his head. Better if —"

"What's better?"

"Eh, that's what life is. Whichever way you turn it's all wrong!"

"Oh, that war, that war!"

* * *

Earlier on they might have talked ill of him in the village for his tight-lipped silence when he came back from the hospital and was given the notice of his son's death. Nothing in him changed. Silently he took the paper and stood for a long time, a block of stone, staring fixedly out of the window. But now people had come to think differently about him. From now on, all gave him a friendly greeting, although he did not always reply. Many may have been ashamed, others pitied him. Pitied him and sorrowed at the thought of this man's whole life lived without happiness.

Perhaps sorrow brought him closer to the village and the

village to him? People looked at him with new eyes, a new understanding. Mikhail had the inner strength to keep himself firmly in hand and hide his pain. And stay among people. He did not go into the forest to dig up stumps. He did not take his staff and go away. Evidently he was too weary to start all over again in another place.

"Come in to us, Neighbour Mikhail," Agafia invited him.

But he never again went to his neighbour, not on church holidays or any others. He asked her about the child's health, and loaded her up with apples, quinces, nuts and grapes.

"They're for the little lad. From Grandad Mikhail. Tell him they're from me!"

Every morning he came to the school with full pockets. He rose earlier than usual, got through his work about the house and went to the school with all kinds of good things.

He lighted all the stoves and listened to night whispering with day, and the roaring of the fire telling its secrets. His numbness left him only when he heard the first children chattering or coughing — there were many who liked to eat snow or suck icicles in winter time. He never scolded them. He was pleased when any of them came extra early. He would go out to meet the early bird and brush the snow off his coat.

"Eh-he-he! You're the first today!"

For the one who came first the pile of apples and handful of walnuts were always bigger than for the rest. Grapes he gave only to girls, to the ones who tried the hardest at their lessons. The latecomers got only dry plums or prunes.

"That's how it goes, those as comes last chew the dry stuff!"

He was truly delighted to see the ones who came running up early. He always asked who they were and sometimes asked after their parents.

"I love the ones as gets up early! Eh-he, little rascals! Did you get here yourselves or did your dad carry you through the drifts?" he loudly greeted the little first-formers when they came tumbling in through the door like cabbage-rolls tipped out of a bowl, coughing and sneezing. Sometimes he could not hold out, and tore off a cluster of the girls' half-dry grapes to treat the little ones, almost extinguished under their big caps; he would seat them close to the stove, talking merrily like a nurse.

"Only mind you don't rub your backs against the stove! Or you'll rub all the lime off!"

Once a tiny girl, warming herself at the stove, coughing and picking grapes from the cluster the school stoker had given her, turned to him and laughed.

"Grandad Mikhail —"

"What are you laughing at, little 'un?"

"Is it true it's better in school than digging stumps in the forest?"

"Who said that?"

"Dad."

"Why, of course it's better! You tell your dad that — much better!"

SAMSON SHLYAKHU

*Glaze**

The beginning of this story goes far back, to the days when building was to start on the empty space where the only thing remaining from its former days as market-place was the half-fallen hut for the collector of market dues. The cattle market had now been transferred to the edge of town, and reconstructed.

Nevertheless, dealers, drovers and hangers-on still gathered there on market days, among the piles of stone and sand. They bawled, they gesticulated, and sometimes there would be a glimpse of a whip-handle brandished over somebody's head, and angry shouts.

These last dregs of trade would spit on the beams recently brought for construction, and throw chance-found stones or even broken bottles into the seething lime.

But if they saw a peasant who had come here by mistake with his nag, they all made a dash for him. They examined the horse's teeth and flashed their fingers before its eyes. Greedy hands felt the ribs, they made it walk and trot. Then, thrusting whips into their boot-shafts, they would stroke the forelock or comb the mane. Laughing, clicking their tongues, they would noisily vie with one another in their praise.

"A fine horse, give a thousand for it!"

"Nay, two!"

"Two? Three at the least!"

Then, remembering, they would sag like the bellows of a

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dead smithy furnace. And again they spat at the beams, kicked some chip which had escaped the axe, and stamped on everything that chanced to come under their feet, even splashes of spilled mortar.

The clanging beat on a hanging piece of rail announced the dinner break. The builders drove their axes into beams and their trowels into the tubs. Beside the barrack, built of slabs and timber remnants and only half roofed, a table spread with red bunting was set up. The technician Voronkov arrived, accompanied by old Timofte who spoke Russian well. The old man, who for some reason drew his urban-style coat in stevedore style with a rope shyly stroked the red material with its traces of printed letters, and then the speech began. He said the building had to be done quickly, and called on the workers to speak their minds.

But everyone looked at Leca. Tudose Leca, the metal worker, could well have come forward to speak. But for some reason he didn't move. He seemed reluctant to say anything; until the time came for roofing, he had to busy himself with odd jobs — using an axe, a builders' trowel, or even a spade.

The unusual silence dragged on for leaden minutes. At last even the women, who as a rule kept out of men's talk, began to show signs of restlessness.

The technician held a paper up to Timofte and whispered something. The old man pulled his rope belt tighter and continued the speech, his eyes on the stonemason Ababie, a great husky fellow in long wide trousers which on him looked too short.

"A telegram's just come from the centre," he said, holding the paper up so that Ababie could see it. "Now, we all know, you've a great love of cutting and dressing the stone to please your eye. And here's the engineers, they want to send you to

Kiev where skilful craftsmen'll teach you to work on something better than stone, you'll be facing walls with tiles, glazed slabs."

Young, strong, good-natured Ababie listened intently to the old man, but when he stopped, glanced at the ladder where a girl in a transparent head-kerchief stood, leaning on a long painter's brush.

Silence. And then something worse happened — that girl's voice nearly broke up the meeting.

"Is he soft in the head, to go running off after that glaze or something? He'd do better to get the barrack roof repaired, so's the draughts don't whistle through!"

Nobody looked up, as though afraid to glance at that roof or with a look betray the mischief-maker. But there were whispers among the girls.

"That's Angelina, the painter, who else would it be?"

"Yes — she's feared the lad'll slip away from her!"

"But isn't Efimash after her, too?"

"What if he is? The more running after her the better she likes it."

Others wished Ababie himself would speak. It was for him to answer the girl's mocking voice. But he said nothing, deep in some thoughts of his own. He looked at the barrack. Through a wide-open window the inside could be seen. Something white hung over a bed in the corner. It was the familiar embroidered shirt on which Angelina had been working so long. The sight sent a pang through him. For whom was she making it?

The silence was broken by the fitter Efimash, who suddenly snatched off his tall hat and dashed it onto the ground as in the good old market days. It bounced and he caught it in the air and jammed it back on his head.

"Who says we don't want glaze?" he cried, making his way

resolutely to the table. "Tiles — we'll be wanting marble yet! We'll build houses like in a tale! I'd go myself if they sent me. If it's settled at the centre, they know what they're doing. Eh, if I was a stonemason, it isn't just Kiev I'd go to, but the end of the world. To face walls with tiles, with glazed slabs."

Like Ababie, Efimash's eyes went to the ladder until they met the pair he had sought, and warmed.

"That barrack — we'll be pulling it down soon enough, so you'd never know it was ever there. We'll build a house that — that — that'll be real beautiful to see! All marble and glaze!"

There was talk and good-humoured laughter in the crowd. Leca's white-whiskered face appeared near the table; he still had his spade, he never parted from it and in his hands it looked an impressive tool. He left Ababie into whose ear he had been whispering and went up to the table. The midday sun struck merry gleams from his spade.

"It's right good, what Efimash says," he said with feeling. "Aye, you spoke real well, Efimash, and my thanks as a worker. Even a navvy can see farther from his hole than a roofer up in the air, if he's got the eyes!" He paused, then turned to the technician.

"Ababie'll go to Kiev. He bade me tell you. He just hasn't the words to speak in front of such a crowd."

Nobody else went up to the table but all tongues were loosened.

Nobody saw dark, quick Angelina, always ready to put in her word, slip through the door of the barrack, drooping.

Only Ababie's eyes followed her. He saw her as she had slipped into his heart, slender in her close-fitting blouse and overalls, her thin blue head-kerchief fluttering in the wind. Mischievous black eyes, a small mouth with a faint down on a trembling upper lip. A light, proud gait.

Angelina went to her corner and stopped uncertainly. She glanced up at the embroidered shirt, then fell forward on the bed, her face in her hands.

Ababie stood by the barrack thoughtfully. Was she angry because he had agreed to go? Never mind, he would come back. And in the end she'd understand what beauty meant in a person's life and say he was right. He wouldn't fascinate her with fine talk, not a word would he say. She could think it all out in the month he would be away. And if she loved him —

* * *

Ababie returned from Kiev with a paper warmly recommending him as worker for facing. But he still went on using ordinary quarried stone, as he had before. There were no tiles on the site, and nobody knew when they would get any. But one difference there was — the stone Ababie dressed began to look almost like tiles. And he dressed it with whole-hearted absorption. Something in his life had changed. There was a new spark in his soft eyes — until Angelina approached. But she said nothing to him, her eyes slid over his strong sunburned neck — and away.

Ababie suffered it silently. He was waiting for just one word from her, but he himself had nothing to say. He knew that Efimash was hanging round her. He felt no resentment, although he was sure Efimash did not love her as he did. He just felt hurt and sore.

Thoughts often tormented him but the bricks lay evenly under his hands. The walls reached up and on the site much changed for the better. But not everything. Old Timofte died — the man Voronkov had got away from the cattle-dealers in the past. He was long remembered, and his words, too.

Much in Efimash's life had changed. His words about the wonderful house, about tiles, when the barrack was only half roofed, had pleased many. Now others asked him to go up to the table with the red cloth and say something, "like that time". And he raised no objections.

As for Angelina, who had once cut the neck of the shirt to fit the stonemason — now she was embroidering it for another.

He can just wear his own dirty shirt, jelly-fish, she thought. Even that last evening before he went to Kiev he was as dumb as his own stones. She seemed to hear passionate whispers and sighed. But it was all in her own mind. Ababie said not a word. He never did. It was only that other who could whisper passionate endearments.

Short as the time was, a brief month, it had done its work. One Sunday night Efimash slipped into the girls' hostel and the next day appeared on the site in the embroidered shirt.

So the builders celebrated a wedding.

Ababie, in a dark shirt with a row of white buttons down the front, stood apart and watched with his meek dark eyes as though he too were trying to share the merry making at Angelina's wedding.

When the long-awaited day came for apportioning the apartments, the builders all agreed that the young couple should have one. It was true, there were not sufficient rooms for many workers with big families. Others, like the tall concrete-layer, often banged their heads on the lintels of their old huts. But nobody grudged a place to Efimash. On the contrary, one day some of his closest friends decided to come and give the young couple a house-warming. High wooden trestles still stood about the house when the guests appeared at the door.

"All the very best to you," said the concrete-layer with a deep bow.

"Come in, come in, good folks," said Efimash, running out to meet them. "Please excuse us, my Angelina's stubborn, got it in her head she wanted to whitewash the ceiling again herself."

He hurried back into the house and a moment later came out with a bottle encased in wicker.

"I'll be right back and we'll fix something. Just a moment."

The guests began examining the house from the outside.

"Eh, may they never know all the sorrow we've drunk to the full," said the grey-headed painter who had taught Angelina her trade.

"You remember, brothers, how he talked that time about glaze," a metal-worker cried suddenly and his eyes shone. "A grand lad. Aye, he talked well, Efimash did. Never mind," he added gently, looking at a bruise on the tall concrete-layer's forehead. "Head up, Platon, and don't spare the concrete! We'll have better than this. You'll see, wait a bit and we won't be getting just one room, but two or three. Real apartments. Big ones with parquet floors. And kitchens and bathrooms faced with tiles, with marble. Aye, that's it. You don't believe me?"

They looked at him with approval, although they knew that apart from one case of tiles received long ago and set in the Red Corner by Ababie, there was no chance for anything of the kind in the near future. Either the material was in short supply, or it was too expensive.

"For that money you could build an extra flat," the builders consoled themselves.

Now Tudose Leca had again reminded them of tiles. But he had little time to remember them, his roofing work was

waiting, his time had come at last. In addition to the metal roof on the almost completed house, he had to see to the water pipes, the gutters, and after that there would be a second house waiting for him, and a third. Yet somehow, without his talk there was always something lacking.

"Please don't go away, good people, Efimash'll be back in a moment." That was Angelina's gay voice from the house.

"We'll bide a bit, he's a good talker, your husband".

"Efimash likes it better at meetings," somebody muttered. "He'll outdo anyone there. But just ordinary talk — he isn't so keen. But bide a bit, Leca. No need for haste. We'll help you if need be."

Then somebody noticed Ababie. He was following his helper, climbing the steps with a great packing-case on his back.

"Take a breather, lads, what's that you've got there?" Some of the men went to him and helped him get his load down.

"You look out, the trade union'll be after you, working overtime," somebody joked.

"Our union watches to see you don't idle, but as for extra work —!" There was general laughter.

"Careful, men, don't break them," Ababie warned.

"What's the fuss, got eggs in there? A long time to Easter yet."

"Tiles," said Ababie, frowning.

"Where are you taking them?" That came from Leca.

"Right here." Ababie's eyes dropped before the other's look. He said no more.

"And where's 'right here'?"

"To Efimash."

"Flimash? What for?" several voices asked at once.

"He got them from the manager." Ababie dropped his head, embarrassed. "He got permission to face his kitchen — with tiles."

"And who gave him a new apartment?" the tall concrete-layer blazed, then his voice dropped. "I'm asking — who gave him a new place?"

"Sure, sure," the old painter muttered. "And there's Platon, can't straighten his back in his hut."

Angelina's dismayed face hung motionless in the half-open door; the blue kerchief fluttered, slipping down on her head.

The metal-worker wanted to speak, but saw her and bit it back, slowly stroking his mustache. He stooped, picked up a gleaming tile from the box and wiped it with his hand.

"Enough of your bawling," he said quietly, thoughtfully. "You ask who gave it him? As if you didn't know. We did. All of us."

The concrete-layer listened in silence. He picked up a gleaming tile from the box, but did not stroke it like Leca.

"It isn't my hut that matters, I won't be doubled up there all my life," he said angrily. "But that case — you just take it back. It can go on standing there in the Red Corner where you put it when it came. You hear me, Ababie? These tiles, if you want to know, helped me break away from profiteers. It was Timofte first made me see, he was my friend. And without him maybe I'd never have been a concrete-layer. I'd still have been a lick-spit for traders and horse-thieves."

Tears suddenly rose in his eyes, but a man who had once been a famous market brawler gritted his teeth and held them back.

"If you don't do as I say, that case'll go out o'the window, and smash!" he shouted.

Meek, gentle Ababie wiped off the sweat with the back of his hand.

"Don't, Platon! Don't! Efimash was the first — about that glaze —"

"Those weren't his own words!" the concrete-layer interrupted, now raging. "I know where he got them."

"That's sure, they couldn't be his own," the grey-headed painter put in. "He'll likely have heard them from someone. Maybe one of us!"

Leca looked for some moments at Ababie, his quick side glance caught the silhouette in the half-open door and he slowly took the tile from the hand of the concrete-layer. He put it on the one already in his own hand and held them both out to Ababie.

"Take them! You're the man with this craft," he said with simple seriousness. "You trained a month in Kiev." Then to the others he added, "A lot can happen in a man's life in a month."

A silence fell, broken by the bang of a door. Angelina came running wildly down the stairs and while Ababie was returning the tiles to the case, she vanished.

The other men helped him raise the case and followed him to the Red Corner, as though waiting for a chance to add the support of their shoulders. They dragged their feet slightly as they walked, as though testing the solidity of the ground beneath them.

When Efimash returned with his full bottle, the place was empty.

ANDREI STRYMBYANU

*White Soot**

There was no snow — not what you might call snow, only a sprinkling, so the spring wind very quickly brushed the white cold mask of winter from the earth, laying bare in the kitchen garden of Ioana's Ion green beds where everything grew which you could want for fresh borshch, and the many little pyramids, each crowned with two potato leaves.

Farther back on the plot, at the end of the vegetable garden, the orchard began. In the morning the tree-tops hid themselves in clouds of mist and smoke so that the orchard seemed to be floating slowly through the air.

In the middle of the orchard stood a square house with a glassed-in veranda, the bare branches casting shadow-patterns on the freshly whitewashed walls.

Aunt Ioana went to the feeding trough and tipped twenty-one fluffy yellow-white balls out of her apron — the first chicks in the village.

This did not go unnoticed. Passing the fence in couples, for in Alba the men never go a step without their wives, people looked over the fence and mused aloud.

"Aye, there's a housewife for you! Yet you'd say she'd hands like all other women folk. It's a lucky man that gets a wife like that."

In Alba both men and women had the trick of thinking aloud, so they would answer themselves or one another.

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"A housewife — that's right. Only the housewife's taken his name from her man."

The men should have agreed with that, but they were fair-minded and liked to have things straight.

"That's as may be," they would say, frowning. "As if it wasn't you womenfolk as first called him Ioana's Ion."

That was a true word, too.

One spring day rather like this, twenty years ago when they'd hardly been married a year, Ioana shook twenty-one chicks out of her apron and went into the house. Not this one with the glassed-in veranda, but another, an old one that seemed to huddle into the ground. The woman looked about her.

"You know what I'm thinking, Ion?"

"And what are you thinking, Ioana?"

"You know what? There's naught to be done in the fields now, let's make over the house. Make a new stove."

Ion looked at the old stove as though he'd never seen it before, thought a bit, sighed, and said, "You know, I think you're right!"

Suddenly he wished it had been his idea, not Ioana's, but it was too late to think of that now, so he repeated, "Aye, you're right."

No sooner said than done. And soon afterwards the good folk of Alba flung up their hands in surprise.

"Dear Lord, Ion, how light the stove and pipe are, you could pick them up and run off with them. And the place looks bigger, and lighter. And smooth as an egg. How can we make one like that? Show us, Ion."

Now, Ion was naturally frank and open, so he told them, "It's only the clay and bricks as is mine. Ioana built it, she knows the trick of it."

This was all the good folk of Alba needed. The next day all the neighbours' children came out black with soot, as though they'd slept in the chimney.

"You've made a new stove, too?"

"Yes, we too!"

"What way?"

"Like Ioana's Ion, Ma says."

Ioana's Ion — that's what they began calling Ion Stangaciu. And that, again, was why the women said he had no name. In any proper family, they said, the man wears the hat, no matter how good a housewife his woman might be.

"Aye, he's a man like others, only he hasn't got his own name, that's all," women said, especially if their menfolk held Ioana up to them as an example. And since they said all this in loud whispers when they passed Ion's house, he heard it all. However, he did not take it amiss.

But how long can people go on talking about a stove? A year passed and Ion showed himself a good husbandman, so that the villagers began talking about that.

"A good man, that Ion! Like his Ioana."

After another year, in spring Ion's son Andrei came out into the street with mustaches of soot. At first the other children kept away from him, but that lasted only for a day, then they all played together again, but now they were all the same, with black mustaches.

So the Alba goodwives again rebuilt their stoves. That's what they're like, nobody wants to be behind the others.

However, the menfolk who might have told their wives before, "Why don't you mend the stove wi' clay? Want me to take you to look at Loana's?" or "Look how fine it's covered, just like Ioana's!" now felt soot gritting on their teeth every spring, heard their wives complaining bitterly of aching backs, and snapped back at them.

"Of course it'll ache! Got your head stuffed with foolishness, getting yourself all over with clay so's to look smart in spring!"

Ion was the only man in the village who felt for his wife.

"Eh, I know — it's an old house, it holds the chill and there's little place to move."

"No, no," aunt Ioana interrupted. "It's just you can't stand the look of the stove."

What could he answer? Of course, if the house had been new, there'd have been no need to bother with stove and pipe, moving it from place to place every year.

So one spring, when Loana shook twenty-one active little balls out of her apron by the feeding trough and was just going to say, "You know what I'm thinking, Ion?" — at this moment he raised his hand and spoke.

"Bide a bit, I've another thought."

He was just a little tipsy, and stood a long time with upraised hand, looking at the ground.

"Bide a bit, bide a bit. I was talking with Neighbour Mark in the canteen. And d'you know what Neighbour Mark said?"

"Well, and what did your Neighbour Mark say to you?"

"Now, don't be angered, Ioana, he's your neighbour too. And we drank your health. Well, so it's this way. Neighbour Mark's team's going to build us a house. All we need is buy bricks from the kolkhoz."

A house! Ioana had been dreaming a long time of a new house, high, with a glassed-in veranda, the way they're built nowdays all over Moldavia.

"Well, what d'you say to that, goodwife?"

"So we won't break down the stove?"

"Not the stove — it's the house we'll break down."

So they did.

They worked all day with Mark's team, and in the evening they went to a neighbour to sleep.

"But it's only today. Tomorrow we're pulling our house down, too," said the neighbour.

"What? But your house isn't old at all!"

"Why do we have to wait till it's falling down? We'll take it down the way it is."

"Where'll you get the bricks? Who'll put up the walls?"

"We've got bricks, and some to put the walls up, too."

So the next night Ion and Ioana asked another neighbour to let them sleep.

"But only for tonight."

He too was going to pull down a house that was quite good. And it didn't stop at those two, within a week fifteen houses were pulled down and the village looked as though there'd been an earthquake.

The worst of it all was, that the team had to break up into several groups.

"How's that?" Ion complained to the teamleader. "You promised me it'd all be ready in a month. And look—!"

"What can I do, if all these folks have gone crazy and pulled their houses down, too? They can't spend the winter in shanties!"

That's what they're like, those good folk of Alba! They scolded their wives for copying Ioana, but all the same they pulled down their houses, and the reason is clear.

And — think of it! — they all seemed to be busy in their yards and never looked over the wall at Ion, yet all fifteen houses were finished on the same day, and all were as like as peas.

It was a dull, rainy day. Ion went into his new house, stood on the veranda in front of a decanter of wine and looked out of the window. The water no longer dripped from the eaves as

it had, it gathered at the corners of a roof of shingles and metal and trickled down into tubs.

Ion stood, turning his glass in his fingers, and smiled as a man does when he has completed a big, difficult job.

But his smile melted away like snow in springtime. When Ioana saw that all twenty-one chicks had their beaks in the trough, she called him out into the yard.

"You know what I'm thinking, Ion?"

So the villagers, who through the summer and winter had talked of "Ion's Ioana", from the spring again started talking of "Ioana's Ion", because that woman couldn't sit quiet even when she had a house with a veranda.

It is true, Ioana, little and thin as a thirteen-year-old, sometimes complained:

"Eh, but that clay'll be the death of me! Every bone's aching!"

One day, hearing it, Ion flung out his arms as though he were standing face to face with the sea.

"Ye-e-es! I'm right sorry for the young wives who follow your ways. It's naught but rheumatism'll learn them, as it has their mothers too!"

Aunt Ioana looked to right and to left, saw nothing suspicious and flung out her arms too, so the old couple stood opposite one another as though preparing to embrace.

That was the moment when Filip the postman arrived.

"Aye, I see you're ready for hugging and kissing. Nay, but Andrei'll see." And he held out a blue envelope in front of them.

"Since you've brought it, read it out for us, I haven't my glasses here," said Aunt Ioana.

"Dear Mum," Andrei wrote from Kishinev. "I can smell the soot from here. You're making the stove over again, for sure. In a month I'll be coming for my holidays with a girl,

and we don't want to eat bread with soot. Maybe you could rest this spring, Mum?"

"My dear son," his mother wrote from Alba. "Your mum's been waiting a long time for you to bring a girl, I'm feeling the years and it's hard to manage the house alone. Come and don't fret, your mother's tired of clay, at last."

In exactly a month, as Andrei had written, a young man arm-in-arm with a slender girl appeared on the hill in front of Alba.

The houses dotted about were white as sugar. Beds were a fresh green in the yards, and it seemed to Andrei as though all those neat houses were his own house and all the women busy in the yards were one woman, his mother.

Children met him on the road, and all of them had mustaches of soot.

"When we get indoors you'll see a charcoal picture," said Andrei. "Or rather, soot."

What was his surprise when he entered and saw the stove standing where it had been the previous year! It was the first time. But what does not move, grows old.

"I see you've freed Mum from soot this spring, Dad?"

"Your mother — yes, but the village — no. I'm afraid that soot'll carry over to other villages."

"It's white soot," said the girl, who had heard the whole story from Andrei.

Aunt Ioana liked that, and she kissed the girl.

"Look at that, now, I saw this soot didn't dirty things, but I didn't know it was white. That's a good word you said, my dear!"

But she, the newcomer, arrived from the great world, was thinking how to change everything in that house, to move things around, arrange them her own way.

VASILE VASILAKE

*Mourning on the Outskirts**

I

A man had been dead for three days, now the fourth was ending and not a word about the funeral. A commission had come from the district town, conducted a post-mortem and taken away the heart — to the capital, folks said, because nobody believed he had died a natural death; but to find out just how he had died was no simple matter.

So the funeral was postponed for yet another day. And the village hummed with gossip because nobody had died in the village for a long time, not since Costica, the former cashier of the Peasants' Bank, and he had been ninety-three and had written everything down on paper — who should have his willow wicker chair, and what memorial repast should be held on the third day, and the ninth, and the fortieth.

Even the children were seldom ill here, there was treatment for all sicknesses now, and the death of the ex-cashier who had lived so long that he only wanted to die had surprised none. When the bell was tolled for him, someone remarked, "Mercy on us, have you heard it? There's none left now with skill on the bell."

Well, so three days passed, and the fourth was ending, and still the village didn't know what to think. A man had died, in his full strength, and left behind a blooming widow and three children, the eldest a marriagable maid, and half a hectare of vineyard round the house, relatives over half the

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village, and plenty to eat and to drink; and there he'd taken and died.

The village couldn't calm down. And the more they talked, the stranger it seemed, because it was a long time since they'd wagged their tongues about this Cruchanu, and now here he was, gone and died, and not like other folks, but the way he took it into his own head, like as if he were saying, "Well, I can do this easy enough too, if you want."

If you listened to Nikanor Bostan, the dead man's neighbour, your head went round, because Bostan had been the last to see him alive and well. He was just climbing down into the gully, coming from the canteen, seemingly, and even smoking, Bostan was surprised — since when had he smoked? — and it made him feel he'd like a smoke himself, but he was digging pits for vines at the back of the vineyard and had no time.

So he went on digging until suddenly it struck him that Cruchanu hadn't appeared out of the gully, so he went through the shrubs towards the canteen and found him there on the path, dead.

All this everyone knew, because the fourth day was closing and it was autumn and all at home, with the maize and beets and grapes in. But each one had to ask about it individually.

"Eh, Neighbour Nikanor, how did it happen with Cruchanu?"

Every time Bostan launched into a detailed account of how he had been at the end of the plot, and what sort of vines he had been planting, how many holes he had dug and how many vines he had set. So they listened and worked, and when the time came to leave that and go on to something else, some joker would pull a bottle out of his bag with "Here's to your holes, Neighbour Nikanor!"

Hiding his annoyance, Bostan would conclude, "Well,

what else is there to say — when I got there, he was lying dead."

His hearers stopped working and stood in silence, and Nikanor Bostan too was silent, for what more was there to say? Not that the dead man lay on his side and his cigarette was still smoking, and red froth was drying in the corner of his mouth — which gave you a very queer sort of feeling, no matter how stiff you kept yourself. Especially since other people die ordinary ways, with the thought that it will come to all in their turn, because a man isn't a star in the sky that shines forever, and to die little is needed, you make peace with yourself and that's the end of it.

II

What did he mean when he said: "Here's to your holes"? It was only on this fourth day the answer occurred to Bostan. As head of the family he had gone to his wife's sister for his nephew's betrothal feast.

The talk had not really got going so just for something to say, somebody started about Cruchanu.

"Strange, the way it is with a man — today he's here, tomorrow he's gone."

The house was filled with good smells of food and wine, and they might well have started, but they waited for one of the match-makers who was late. Perhaps accidentally, or perhaps deliberately someone again brought up Cruchanu, the talk about him was likely to go on until he was under the ground, and then a little more to wind it up. Even the young man's grandmother had her word to say.

"May the earth lie lightly on him, with all his cares at an end!"

But it was too early to close the talk, and the girl's father added gently, "Eh, cares, cares — if you want you'll have them, if you don't — you won't."

"That's the way of it," the girl's mother agreed. "Only I've heard tell he drank till his veins burst."

Nikanor's wife couldn't let that pass without putting in her word.

"Nay, sister, it's the truth I tell you, Ox-Eyes was the death of him."

This name might have been just what the women were wanting — Ox-Eyes was alive, it was no sin to talk about her, fire consume her! She could still turn someone's head, if she wanted. Rutsa's eyes had long been without master or happiness, not without reason she was nicknamed Ox-Eyes. If some imp made you look into those eyes it was a curse, you drowned in them and couldn't rise, and a second pair of eyes even if you had them wouldn't save you.

"Well, and what? Is she the start and end of all?" Nikanor put his word in. "When have you ever known it, that a man ends his life because of a woman?"

"Well, who was it, who else if not that Ox-Eyes, that addled his wits," Nikanor's wife argued hotly. "The chairman, maybe, that sent him out to the stock sector to tend the geese? Is he in fault that he didn't say, 'Look, now, have a care with Ox-Eyes there'?"

"Nay, let be, it was prison as finished him," said the girl's father.

All nodded and wanted to agree, but nobody really believed it, and the more they tried to believe the less they could. In the first place, anybody could be a watchman and fall in love with Ox-Eyes, but when it came to prison, it sounded queer; two or three in the village had tasted that and nothing happened to them, they didn't make an end of themselves. And if you say Ox-Eyes was to blame, then why did he send her money from prison, and why did she go to visit him there, and why did he receive her there in the camp?

And if prison was so hard on him, why didn't he die right there? What was the sense of coming back to the village and laying hands on himself here, so that everyone would rack their brains in torment?

"But say, neighbours, what sort of family's that, if a wife — for some injury or something said or done wrong — goes to court about it! What sort of family?" the girl's father wanted to say more, but the talk turned now to the dead man's widow and opinions about her were many and various.

The hottest blame came from the men and the young man's mother, while Nikanor's wife and the girl's mother defended her. The only conclusion was, "Then be so good, tell us who's to blame?"

The question came from Nikanor and nobody could answer it. So as this was, after all, a betrothal party, and they would be sitting for a long time over their glasses, they shrugged it off.

"Fate, fate, neighbour!"

Silently they began to eat, and then talked about this and that, things clear as a sunny day, and round the table they became one family, because although the wedding had not yet taken place, it very soon would.

III

In this talk the faces of the newly-related cleared and there would have been no delay if only that match-maker had come punctually.

"Have you heard, will they be burying him with a priest or music?"

That brought guesses of every kind. If he was buried outside the churchyard walls because he'd killed himself, then the priest might not come, knowing he'd lost his faith. But those from the farmboard might put their ear in, too, and if so, could there possibly be music?

"If it comes to that, whether it's his wife's to blame, or Ox-Eyes, or prison, or banishment to the stock farm — it's the dead that judges the dead! And for that matter, what did he want with my cousin, when he near beat the guts out of him?"

All nodded and thought: yes, yes, what had happened between him and Neighbour Toader? And they shook their heads: How's it we didn't think of that before? Toader was the sort, you'd never see his like, and a neighbour, they were more like brothers, such friends they were, and had their gay times together, and both were watchmen, and Toader that good-hearted, like none other.

That evening, when everything crashed like thunder from a clear sky, Cruchanu had taken a drink or two with Toader. All of a sudden he said, "Well, Toader, what if I finish you off now — what'll you say to that?"

"I just say: take another glass of wine."

But Gheorghe Cruchanu hurled the glass into Toader's face, hard. And then beat him up and kicked him.

Fortunately, Cruchanu's wife whom he had beaten up that same evening was hiding from him in the kolkhoz bee-garden; hearing the noise she ran to part them, and when Cruchanu saw her he left Toader and went after her; it was a good thing there were people passing, they heard Toader moaning and carried him on a mattress to the hospital.

"The roaring devil!"

Toader kept repeating that. He was an old man, with not much longer to live, so for that reason he forgave Cruchanu when he came to the hospital some days later and kissed his hands and pleaded:

"Forgive me, Toader, I'm out o' my mind! Forgive me, I do something crazy and don't know what I'm doing. Oh!"

Toader would never have forgiven it, not for anything, but he was a man of rare warm-hearted kindness, so forgive he did.

Then Cruchanu was sent to the stock farm, and Ox-Eyes came between him and his wife, and the wife, so often beaten, at last went to law against Cruchanu.

"Uff, uff, uff, how stupid women are, these days!" said Nikanor Bostan's wife.

But which of the two was to blame? And again everyone found that all their talk led to no conclusions, because both of them, wife and mistress, had begged for their Gheorghe to be released, begged for a pardon; but when he did come out he didn't want to see either the one or the other. He'd come to the bottom.

"God's truth. What for? How? Why? Life, neighbours — it's a riddle if you don't unravel it yourself, because it's your own, you rise with it in the morn and go to bed with it at night, and there's none'll solve it for you."

Again somebody raised a glass.

"Good fortune and success to the young couple! May they live and understand each other with goodness and fairness! And bring up their children to live well.... Aye, Cruchanu's left three. And you who'll soon be a husband, good health to you and heed your elders, because there's many things can happen in a family. Today you give way to your wife, tomorrow she to you. Take that same Cruchanu, for instance...."

It was a strange betrothal party. Like an arithmetic lesson in the bottom form. What do we write down? And what do we carry over? And why do we write only 7 for seventeen and carry the 1 in our heads, and why is that 1 in our heads more than the 7 we've written?

IV

The young man picked up a glass, kissed the hand of the one who wished him happiness, sipped the wine and then sat submissively quiet, because had his father been alive he would not have been sitting there with the neighbours at all, but as his father had been killed near Warsaw the son had come into man's estate early, and nobody could say that he had no place here. So now and then he put in his word.

"There was one time I was at the mill and Cruchanu shouted at me, 'Whose son are you?' That was in the beginning of the 'fifties, and he was younger than dad, mum, wasn't he? Well, and he shouts at me, 'Whose are you?' So rough I near cried. But he says, 'You're feared, are you? Nay, don't be feared of me, it's just my voice as is rough. Hey there, men, give the lad a place on the pile!"

What's past is past — but he wasn't heartless, the guests nodded, and when the talk was of Cruchanu being, "rough" or "not without heart", the words did not convey "roughness" or "good-heartedness" in the usual sense, because everybody has times when he is angry or kind, but Cruchanu's words and heart could not be conveyed by words; he might open his eyes and say "good morning" and even those two words were spoken like tossing a pair of dices into the game, and he not giving a rap what they turned up — a pair of sixes or a pair of ones, as though the game held not a jot of interest for him.

The companions round the table sighed, clinked glasses and again wished happiness to the young couple, crops to the fields, good actions to rulers and warmth to orphans. It was high time to recall what had brought them together round that table, but now the young man himself continued about Cruchanu.

"Who's going to care for his children now: Zaharia, Eftena, Alexe, Costake, Kiril, Ion — which are the nearest relatives?"

So the women began sorting out who was related to Cruchanu and how, until they went back to the roots, to the great-great-grandfather called Hynku or Gureu, they had almost forgotten his name; but Cruchanu — that was the name given his great-great-grandfather because he had been the first in these parts to use the word "cross" (*cruche*) in anger.

"But tell me, be so kind, what sort of a man is it as never lets out a hearty curse?" Nikanor Bostan protested.

"Oh, Cruchanu lived wide and free there, at the edge of the village," signed the young man's mother, while the girl's father explained to his future son-in-law, although it was more like explaining to himself:

"Aye, he moved over, that he did, but why — how can I say?"

"Let him tell you about it," said bride's mother, indicating her husband. "I keep telling him and telling him, let's move over too, there's room there for the pigs and poultry. But you hear him, he just says, 'Bide a bit till the others go out, and then we'll be right on the edge instead of the middle.' "

"How much of a plot did Cruchanu have round his house?"

"All he's got now's three arshins," someone said and that brought silence.

Now they had come to the real thing: with permission or without, the dead man asked for his three arshins so as to go away forever, leaving behind him *something* — vivid, clear, more serious than a monument, more necessary then icons — the word which is always with you.

For three days these people had been seeking that word, and this Sunday, the fourth, had been as it were specially accorded them, and all for nothing. The dead man's actions could not be gathered into a unit, and you had to try and find a name for them.

V

"I kiss your hand, grandmother." The young man was now doing the honours. "Eat, mother, try this, father." He was accustoming himself to addressing his future in-laws as was becoming. "And you, mum, and dad, and aunt and uncle; but I want to ask you how it all ended, I went to the army and never knew the end." It appeared there was much he didn't know.

"You've forgotten? How could you forget it? When Cruchanu said, 'You stupid dolts! Serves you right, you fools!' "

"Could he really have called us fools? How, when? Us, sitting here at this table?" Relatives new and old looked at one another in confusion as though regretting that this had been mentioned. "This finishes it, eh dear, dear. What's this, and we never noticed the bridegroom was feeling the drink!"

Then the bridegroom's mother as hostess produced a diversion with: "Please help yourselves, dear relatives."

And the grandmother lamented, "Oh dear Lord, all the same thing, all the time, as if this was a funeral wake!"

The girl's father said quickly, "Thank you, goodwife, everything on the table is fine. But isn't it time to run and fetch our lagging match-maker?"

The bridegroom, however, was not to be put off: "Maybe you weren't there at that meeting? Uncle Nikanor, what did they call the chairman we had then? You remember, they were going to kick him out. What was his name, it's slipped my mind...."

"Aaah, Herbeleu, that was the one," and there was a sigh of relief. "But that was a long time past," and people thought doubtfully: all the same, when he called us fools whom did he mean in particular? He could say it all right, he could. But what'll you prove now, and who to? It's no joke, when you're called a fool and there's none to answer for it.

Then they began to argue about Herbeleu, he was alive, you could make your demands on him, like Ox-Eyes. When he was chairman the kolkhoz hardly dragged along, and Anicutsa bore a child unwed. But that had nothing to do with Cruchanu, and was left alone for the present.

"I keep forgetting things, all the time I do, my mind must be failing. I go out to get something and forget what I've gone for, I come back and say to myself, 'What did you go for, you fool?' That's how it is. When you look at it right well, it's good we're alive. But our life's like the dew!"

"Indeed it is, a true word."

"But if you really think on, then — och!" He stopped, musing.

All were silent, thinking, remembering. Remembering that evening when the club was packed full, and the corridors too, and all were silent as though struck dumb, as though they needed another year to think before they answered the brief question put from the platform: "Is Herbeleu any good or not? Who wants the floor?"

Cruchanu had already spoken. He had exposed all Herbeleu's actions to the light of day and now shouted from his place, "No good! Hi, folks, why don't you others say something!"

But the meeting was silent.

Then he took the floor again. He mounted the platform with his tousled head, grey at thirty, and from there shouted

a second time, facing the ones sitting up there and pointing at the others gathered in the hall.

"You see them? Looks like I talked all wrong. Isn't that the way of it?"

Then he turned to the villagers and shouted at them angrily, furiously:

"So that's it, you stupid dolts! It serves you right, fools! So Herbeleu's good!"

Fists clenched, he jumped down sideways, comically. Some of the schoolchildren actually giggled, someone else applauded.

If Cruchanu had remained on the platform and not left the hall, they'd have spat in his face for those words. But as he went, they sat gaping, because who'd ever heard of such a thing — that a man dared call the whole village fools — right in their faces, big and small alike!

So to spite somebody, no one knew who, Herbeleu remained chairman for another year. And how well everyone remembered it! That summer all the work went wrong, until autumn came at last, and the meeting sent him packing. And all that summer Cruchanu kept finding fault with the chairman. There wasn't a meeting in the village without Cruchanu going against Herbeleu and Herbeleu against Cruchanu, as though the devil had set them at one another.

The village, too, poured fuel onto the fire. "You tell him, Gheorghe! Go on, Gheorghe! Let Gheorghe speak first!"

From then on, Gheorghe's name was spoken only with respect, and when the old chairman came back from a study course, they made Gheorghe chairman of the auditing committee so that everything would be clear, because there had been dark suspicions.

But then one night Gheorghe was caught with a bunch of vine cuttings stolen from the kolkhoz vineyard — eh, better not remember it; so then they gave him up.

VI

The relatives smoked, pressed food on one another and rested, as though this Cruchanu had actually tired them; and their thoughts turned to other things.

"Ugh, the days are drawing in. Before you've time to turn round, it's evening," sighed the girl's mother.

"There's few observes the church festivals these days," the young man's grandmother complained.

"And that's a true word. We live together but die apart. Your health!" Somebody raised a glass.

"Aye, a true word. But what did that commission do? I can't mind me, if I die for it," said the girl's father.

"Eh, let Cruchanu alone, eat before it all gets cold," the young man's mother fussed.

The young man was deep in his own thoughts, but hearing his father-in-law, he asked, "Uncle Nikanor, was he on the board, would you say?"

"He was on it. Or mebbe he wasn't, I don't mind me." Nikanor spoke under his breath as though answering a question of his own. "And what was it worth, an armful of cuttings and mebbe it was just a tale. Or mebbe it wasn't. But who'd have thought it!"

That was the whole trouble, all misunderstandings came from that: you seemed to be burying not just one dead man, but two, three or four Cruchanus, and after weighing all doubts, they saw each Cruchanu separately, so to speak: one with a house in the middle of the village, another with a house on the hill, yet another at the meeting attacking Herbeleu and being taken on the board, and still another, little and agile, with an armful of cuttings at night on the

kolkhoz vineyard, and still another with Ox-Eyes, and again, as Uncle Toader said, one possessed of a devil, and still another with a wife and children, and finally after prison, not wanting to see anyone — children, Ox-Eyes or wife — the very last one, the one who had laid hands on himself.

See how many Cruchanus there were! And to accept and make peace with them all, you had to choose one and remember just him and bury him in that guise; but that was devilishly difficult, because each of those Cruchanus had been Cruchanu from his birth to his death, and if any of the company argued hotly that he had found the one who should be consigned to oblivion, another rejected it flatly:

"Wait, it wasn't like that at all!" And after a pause added, "It was the fate he was born with."

"They say poor Gheorghe didn't know what world he was living in."

"Didn't know? I tell you, it was his fate, poor sinner!"

"Why a sinner?"

"Why? And Ox-Eyes? Why couldn't he sit at home?"

"You keep quiet, wife, what sin? Shame isn't smoke, it doesn't sting your eyes," said Nikanor angrily, glass in hand. "Let's drink to your health, nigh-bridegroom, and see you don't fall asleep before we drink to your bride-to-be."

They clinked glasses, all thinking their own thoughts. And solving the problem, simple as the world: Add this to that, and that's how it works out. Seventeen, and why's the one you carry more than the seven you write?

Night was falling.

The dead man's house looked out on the road with the white eyes of towels.

Nikanor was slightly tipsy when he came down from Ion Mikhail's Anisia. Cruchanu's daughter had brought him a message from her mother, asking him to find Anisim

Scortsosu and get him to read a service over the dead man, but he couldn't find Anisim.

He saw how passers-by looked at the white patches and quickened their steps, averting their eyes; but after passing that house, the last in the village, they looked back at it.

From the centre of the village came a drum-beat and the shouts of merrymakers, because this Sunday there was a wedding and two christenings.

Queer, thought Nikanor. A bride in a white veil — and look how they eye these white patches.

There was agitation in the dead man's house where they were waiting for the grave-diggers, and the match-maker who had been late for the betrothal party because he had been in the graveyard choosing a place for the grave now sat, hungry, with the others. The women who had been preparing food for the wake were likewise hungry, and so, of course, were Cruchanu's wife and children, but they had no thought of food.

From the inner room came laments.

"*Arise, dear one, whose sorrows are ended,*

Look at your village, all have gathered,

But you they will never meet again!"

"Good evening," said Nikanor on the threshold and indicating the inner room with his head, asked, "Has she been in there long?"

"Let her be, Nikanor," said an old woman, "it eases her."

Nikanor lighted a cigarette and his wife flung up her hands.

"Oh dear, oh dear, smoking again. Don't smoke in here!"

Another woman asked, "The betrothal's over? When's the wedding to be?"

"E-e-e-eh! What sort of betrothal's that? Hat and

handbag — that's all their household goods!" Nikanor's wife retorted.

As she saw it, betrothals these days were not worth the name, not like they used to be. Before parents had time to say a word, the bridegroom made his own arrangements, the way he wanted it all. He didn't want a house, no use for it, he didn't want a cow, no use for it. He got his house from the state and his clothes from the state, he was a fireman in town and as for that cow, let them keep it or slaughter it, whatever his in-laws themselves wanted, as for him — a wedding, with the whole district invited, so that he could bring his bride home from a real celebration.

Again the lament came from the inner room:

"Arise, my man, look about,
See, your house is ready,
The house as ordered,
With no doors, no shutters,
Only great nails driven in
Into the bare boards!"

Nikanor listened, looked at the former parlour and marvelled, it was as though a shell had driven through it from wall to wall. Before Cruchanu abandoned his family and started living there he had first driven an entry through the wall on the vineyard side, so that he need not go through the common entry; so that he would see nobody, meet nobody.

"Aye, the weather's just right for taking in the grapes."

People come for the funeral talked with decent quietness. Nikanor agreed. "M'yes, yes."

Still the lament came from the inner room:

"Go to the gate,
Say a word to neighbours,
Go to the road

To hear them greet you
With good wishes for your journey.
Go to the crossroads
And take leave there of the world...."

"You didn't promise to be sponsor, Nikanor?"

"I will be if they ask, no getting out of it."

"Then why are you so quiet, like?"

Nikanor gave no answer, he was looking at the shut and nailed door which no one used, and at the barrel in the corner: that's where he found his death.

He had filled the barrel with black wormwood hybrid, the steam from that hybrid flamed if you splashed a little on a hot stove.

He had sucked at that wine like a child at its mother's breast. Drew it in like medicine through a rubber pipe, as though he sought not sweetness, but the oaken strength.

Again the lament came from the inner room:

"*You wished for a house of pine*
To have a better life,
And left us that clay hut,
And left us our grief...."

He himself never noticed how he began to sink into the ground, as though his vital juices drained away through the thin matting. The earth was urgent to take him wholly, and now and then he trembled, and sucking his wine, dried up.

The lament continued:

"*Poor lashes and brows*
They will grow in green grass...."

Talk died away among the mourners. Then Nikanor could endure no more.

"Enough, good people. She may lose her wits!"

VII He turned towards the inner room, but the woman came out herself, her face swollen with weeping.

At that moment somebody began a story:

"Day before yesterday my nephew from the academy came and started asking me:

" 'What would you do, Uncle, if you were young again?'

" 'Well,' I told him, 'Make me young and you'll see.'

" 'No,' he says, 'answer me, please. If you had your mind of today and your body with all its youth.'

" 'Well,' I says, 'I'd first drink a bit, and eat a bit and mebbe fall in love if I found one as pleased me.'

" 'And how long would you keep that up?' he says.

" 'As long as I could,' I told him.

" 'You'd get tired of it,' he says, 'after a while.'

"But I told him, 'You get tired of it, anyway. You get tired of aught if you go on with one and the same thing.'

"Then he said, 'And besides that, you'd plant a tree, and clean out the well, and then everything would go more cheerful-like.'

" 'And that's right,' I said, 'the first and second and third and fourth, that's the way life goes, we all know.' "

Cruchanu's widow Irina went round the men and the women cooking food with a jug of wine, and kissed the hands of the oldest ones.

"My deepest bow to you," she said, "and thank you for coming. It's hard to be all alone.... Take a glass of wine and drink in memory of Gheorghe, och!..."

"Thank you, and may you have good health, Irina. And don't think too much.... There's my woman, she's always complaining her head aches. 'Trucks, trucks,' she says, 'what are they all made for?'

"And I tell her, 'Plenty of roads, aren't there?' And now

Zhenya, my lodger, a zoo-technician, she's gone. And there's none for the old woman to talk to....

" 'I'm getting married,' Zhenya tells me.

"First she started bringing lads to the house, under the window. And I tells her, 'That's no way.'

"Then the girl married. 'I'm going to get wed, Goritsa.' And I told her, 'That's a good thing, you're getting wed.'

"But my old woman, she says, 'What's the silly girl doing that for?' I told her, 'Hold your tongue, mebbe it's for her happiness.' "

"Take you a glass of wine, too, Neighbour Nikanor," said Irina, "and please, be so good — come tomorrow, or there'll be no bearers. All I asked say they'll come, but whether they will or not — och!"

Nikanor Bostan promised and wished good health to all, and that the earth rest lightly on the dead man, and with glass in hand talked about Ion Mikhai's Anisia, who'd been a widow for more years than they could count and all had forgotten her.

"It was that Anisia, if you mind you, all the valley laughed at her, remembering her elastics!"

That Anisia had found two pieces of rubber from a German telephone wire and made garters of them for her stockings, and never taken them off, day or night, summer or winter, till in the end they grew right into her legs like wires into the acacias along the road.

"You remember, she lived in a hut with a pig and two goats! Well, she found herself a husband, the one who ought to be reading the funeral service today, what's his name? Anisim Scortsosu, and if you could see Anisia now!

"I tell her, 'Good evening, Aunt Anisia!' And I take a look — a bed like they have in town, white curtains at the windows, sheets white as snow — good as a hospital, may I

never move from here if it isn't!" Nikanor was showing the effect of the drinks he'd taken.

"I told her, 'I've just been at Anisim's house, Aunt Anisia, and they sent me here.'

" 'Eh, Nikanor,' she says, 'and I'm waiting for him, I made dinner and it's getting cold, and he doesn't come.'

"There she was in a white skirt with a stripe, and a white apron, waiting for him.

"I looked and couldn't believe my eyes, good people — was it her or not!"

The women prepared the food and thought their own thoughts. But the men's eyes glistened and words were ready to fly — salty, sour or peppery, depending on the ways and character of the speaker — about those two rubber bands. But they did not hurry, they left something to simmer for the next day, there'd be time for talk by the maize stacks or the vines, why hurry? The acacia by the gate was blossoming a second time, sure sign of a long fine autumn.

"Well, what would she do all alone, poor thing?"

"Fall ill, heaven forfend, and none to give her a cup of water."

"Eh, and the size of the vineyard by Anisia's house!"

"Uff, uff, uff!"

A young woman kept saying, "Maybe it's her happiness!" interrupting with Nikanor's story.

"And there's this, I told her, Neighbour Irina asked your Anisim to come and read prayers over the coffin. And you know what that old woman said? 'With all my heart, dear man, but he isn't in practice now.' Well, what d'you say to that?"

Nobody answered. The women's supple fingers played in the reddish maize flour, time was getting on, they had to finish in time. Suddenly the door opened and Ox-Eyes,

Rutsa, entered, paused for a moment as all eyes were bent on her, then said very softly, "Good evening".

Irina, the dead man's wife, invited her to sit down. Silence. Then Irina spoke.

"Take a glass of wine, Rutsa, and drink to the peace of the poor Gheorghe's soul."

Rutsa reached out and kissed Irina's hand, and her shoulders shook with weeping.

"Oh, dear Irina." She set the glass down on the table. "I can't bear it."

Through her tears she looked at all, at the widow of Gheorghe Cruchanu, and spoke through sobs:

"Please, I beg you, Irina — let me cry!"

Silence. It was as if each one wanted to say something, said something, but so softly that hardly any heard.

"Eh, my dear...."

*Kolibikha**

What don't they find to say about women! — And most of all about women's cowardice. Like hares, afraid of their own shadows. Try to dispute it and you'll be floored by the categorical argument: a man's a man and a woman's a weak female! And that settles it!

Only — I *have* met young fellows old enough to shave who went out in the evenings holding mama's hand.

But that's only talk. Wouldn't it be better to tell you a story?

There's an old woman living on Chiritei. You can still meet her by the well with full buckets. Old, and bent like her own yoke, but as strong as the oak wood of which it is carved.

Neighbours greet her with respect.

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"Taking water, Mother Matrena?"

"Aye, water, and thank you for a good word."

As soon as she's couple of paces away, neighbour will say to neighbour, "A worthy woman."

Matrena had been an orphan since she was five, and her father had died even earlier. She lived with her brothers. There were three of them, all married, so she would stay a while with one, then go on to another. She looked after her small nephews and nieces, helped with the housework and slept anywhere and everywhere. It's well known that the orphan's bread is salted with tears. Her sisters-in-law gave her no peace, they vied with one another in nagging and sharp words, but never a tear she shed. Only sometimes her eyes would sink deeper under her sun-bleached lashes and fix themselves on her tormenter — but there was no self-pity in them, and she never let out a sigh.

"A devil's imp, that girl," said the youngest sister-in-law. It was like a splinter under a nail, that half-hectare of land her parents had left to Matrena, and the cottage standing so pleasantly on the hill beside the forest, like a dove-cote, under a huge spreading oak.

The girl grew up strong and sturdy. She ploughed, sowed and reaped as well as any grown man. She wasn't afraid to graze horses at night with boys of her own age. And she would set her horse galloping so that none of them could overtake her. There was never a word from them about her being "only a girl", and out of place there.

One joker did try to raise a snigger at Matrena's expense — the kind of lad who isn't much good at anything except talk, the kind about whom they say: "Goes round a tree-stump but kicks against a man."

It was on the pasture at night, when they were baking maize cobs on a fire. With a triumphant look all round he

said slyly, "Doesn't your skirt bother you when you mount a horse? What'll happen if it rides up? What then?"

The boys laughed, of course. Matrena rose from her knees and went up to the boy. But he wasn't quelled.

"Well, can't you find an answer?"

The answer came. With one hand she grasped his shirt collar, with the other his belt, and swung him round in the air like a kitten. When she set him down his legs buckled dizzily under him, and he started shamefacedly examining his torn trousers. He'd had enough of joking.

From the time she was a child the village addressed her respectfully by her full given name and surname — Matrena Koliba. Then, when she grew up into maturity, they called her Kolibikha. Even her husband, Ifteni Pugui, was known as Kolibikha's Ifteni.

Her whole adult life was lived in her father's house on the edge of the forest. And the number of chicks stolen from her yard by foxes and pole cats! A gully grown with prickly thorns led from the thickets right to her gate. And in the stormy winter nights hungry wolves howled right under the windows.

At one time Ifteni, Kolibikha's husband, was watchman at the pig farm, that was when kolkhozes joined up. He was a good, careful watchman and every year he brought home a bonus. Gradually, however, his health began to deteriorate, and his joints ached. But he did not want to change his work, he valued those bonuses.

Two years ago he stood stubbornly at his post right up to the autumn holidays, and again received a bonus. He had already had his eye on a piglet, he had even surreptitiously fed it from his hand; he wanted this one in particular, so as to breed the "Moldavian Blacks". As soon as it was his, he handed in his resignation.

In addition to his bonus piglet he bought another for company, and fixed a shed where he could feed them up; let them grow fat a hand's span in thickness.

The winter was a cold one, with the bark cracking on the trees.

One evening a blizzard got up, and it had to be that very night Ifteni forgot to shut the pigsty; so a wolf carried a piglet away. Before he could do anything the squeals were coming from the forest. He had time only to shout, "Stop him!" and the barking of the dogs wakened the whole village. The yard pup yapped a couple of times apologetically after the wolf and stopped.

The scolding he got from Kolibikha! She kept on till the morning, calling him every sort of name. He said nothing, but decided silently: tomorrow I'll sell something at the bazaar and buy a gun. It's no good being without a gun, right by the forest. It's different in the village, a young fellow shouts in the night, or a drunk goes by singing. But here! Take today, now, if I'd had a gun to fire I'd have saved the piglet.

"All right, let be, now," he said to his old wife pacifically. "Tomorrow I'll buy a gun."

"Aye, that's all a daft fellow needs!" Matrena was not to be pacified. Grandad Ifteni, quiet and submissive as he might be, had had enough. "Shut up, now! I'm sick of your yap! Maybe it was my bonus the wolf took."

That didn't please her, either.

"What's the fine idea, are you dividing up all we've got into yours and mine?"

Ifteni was tired of the endless attacks.

"Listen, Matrena, if folk have got sheep and pigs, then the 'gentry's' right there, he's God's creature and wants to eat too. If there wasn't sheep and pigs, there wouldn't be

wolves — 'gentry', that is," he corrected himself quickly, because it was unlucky to use the word "wolf" at night.

"Don't you try to put me off, with your 'gentry', better confess it's easier lying by the stove then looking after things."

All night long the old couple never closed an eye. Ifteni went outside again to look into the pigsty — and get a moment's rest from the scolding. He returned, made himself a cigarette as thick as his finger and stole a look at the bench where Matrena was sitting.

"Thank heavens, there's still the pig left for breeding."

With the first faint light Ifteni drove another stake in by the pigsty door, fixed the door so that it shut tightly and fastened the pup to the stake.

"Why d'you want to torment a babe, he's but tiny, it's early for a chain," Kolibikha said, looking at the shivering little animal.

"I mustn't buy a gun, I mustn't tie up the pup! D'you want me to lie down myself with the pig?"

He looked at the pup — surely it would bark a warning?

The wolf was no fool, the second night it did not come, and the third passed without incident. On the fourth the blizzard got up again, the air was thick with white flakes and the forest groaned and howled with a thousand voices.

That evening Kolibikha went to the village to help her granddaughter prepare for a christening party. Well, that takes some time, there were curd cakes to make, and brawn, and then you had to try a glass of the wine, and gossip about this and that. And so it went on until the cock crowed midnight. Her granddaughter of course urged her to stay overnight, but Kolibikha wouldn't hear of it.

"I've got my own home and the master waiting for me. I'd never close an eye all night here."

The granddaughter lived in the centre of the village. But as the village street wound and twisted like a rope on a sack, Kolibikha decided to take a short cut, straight through the kitchen gardens.

"Oooooh!" howled the wind and "Vooooh!" the forest gave back. The snow danced before her eyes. Ground and sky were one. In weather like this the best thing is to stop at home by the fire.

But Kolibikha stepped as firmly as though she hadn't even tasted wine. Home was quite close now. A piteous wail came from the yard, something between a violin and a child.

That's the pup, he's cold, she thought. Oh Ifteni, Ifteni!

The wind drove into her face, holding her back. The old acacia creaked, a stack at the back of the yard rustled, reeds were torn off the roof. Kolibikha walked through the darkness towards the sounds; a step, another, and all of a sudden — the wolf!

"Ahhh!" She couldn't even scream; her hair rose. "Lord God!"

She thrust her hands forward to grasp the steely neck, but what she caught was the ears.

"Hyk!" The beast shook his head, his mouth gaped open, the next moment he would get her, tear her to pieces. The pup squealed, but Kolibikha's voice was like thunder.

"The wolf! Here, good people, here!" The wind caught her voice and carried it far and wide.

The pup took courage and barked loudly. The wolf struggled to get its front paws down on the ground but Kolibikha — where did she find the strength? — held the ears in an iron grip, as though it were not an old tough wolf but a frightened sheep.

Grandad Ifteni dashed out, dragging on his coat, and

made for the pup. "Hold it, bite it, tear it to pieces!" he told the little beast in a breaking voice.

"The axe!" Kolibikha screamed and clenched her teeth as though they too held the wolf.

Despite darkness and blizzard the village came to life. Dogs barked, smelling the wolf. People wakened. And the wind howled without pause of let-up, like a live thing.

Grandad Ifteni dashed out, dragging on his coat, and wrong with him — cold? Frightened? His tongue was like a piece of ice in his mouth.

"The head, get the head!" the old woman told him. But how could he make out in that darkness what was wolf and what was Kolibikha?

"Ugh!" He brought down the axe.

"Aaaah!" Kolibikha screamed. Ifteni had chopped off two fingers of her left hand.

"You sightless devil!" Kolibikha yelled, and had it not been for the thirty-nine years they had lived together, had it not been for the soup they had eaten from the same pot and the five children they had reared, it would have gone hard with the old man.

Ifteni stood as though rooted, haggard with horror, head drawn down between his shoulders. Kolibikha was in a cold sweat — either from pain or from disgust and desperate weariness.

"Help!" she called weakly.

Grandad came to himself, ran up to the wolf and tugged at its tail.

Voices approached, and the lights of lanterns. The wolf lay limply.

The village didn't calm down until morning, dogs barked till they were hoarse, infants cried. But on the porch of Kolibikha's house lay the stiffening wolf.

*Notes on the Contributors**

VLADIMIR BESHLYAGE, prose writer and publicist, born 1932.

Vladimir Beshlyage began by writing stories for children; his first collection of these was published in 1956, and of stories for adults in 1963.

The most popular of Beshlyage's works is the novel *The Call of the Martlet*, written as an inner monologue by the main character. The author has sought a new way of disclosing the tragic imprint of the past war on human lives.

Beshlyage concentrates his attention on the inner world of his characters, building up a chain of associations. He skilfully combines gentle folk humour with subtle psychological analysis.

EMILIAN BUKOV, poet and prose writer, born 1909.

Bukov graduated the Kishinev Lyceum and the Literary and Philosophical Faculty of Bucharest University. Up to the reunification of Bessarabia with Soviet Moldavia in 1940 he took part in underground revolutionary work and wrote for progressive journals.

Since 1940 Emilian Bukov has put out several collections of verse, plays, and short stories telling of the past and showing the socialist transformation in the life of the Moldavian people.

In 1966 he was awarded the State Prize of Moldavia for his literary work.

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YAKOB BURGHIU, prose writer, cinema director, born 1940.

Stories by Yakob Burghiu first appeared in print in 1961; these were followed by collections: *The Sun on Crutches* (1966) and *Water Gathers in the Well* (1970). Burghiu likes to write about Moldavian villages, which he knows well. Most of his stories are constructed around small, unexpected events. They are more observation than narrative; he tries to use to the maximum the plastic and acoustic qualities of words. The characters in Burghiu's stories have a keen ear for every rustle of sound, an eye for every detail, so that contact with the surrounding world becomes close and alive, and the images acquire an especial freshness, a polyphonic resonance. His prose is shot through with sunshine, it has its own melody and is rich in metaphors. One feels in him a rather special and if one might so express it, a cinematographic vision of the world.

MIKHAIL CHIBOTARU, prose writer, publicist, born 1934.

His first collection of stories, *The Silence of Forests*, and his literary essays *Song of Brotherhood* came out in 1965. They were followed by more collections of stories: *The Pain of Silence* in 1969, *The Voice of the Heart* in 1971 and his first novel, *The Sowers*, in 1973.

Nearly all Mikhail Chibotaru's writing is placed in Moldavian villages. As a rule he builds his stories round acute conflicts between the social and the personal, paying great attention to the behaviour of his characters during the years of war, and its echoes in post-war life.

Mikhail Chibotaru's prose is marked to a considerable extent by a narrative, descriptive character and in style approaches the literary essay style.

ION CHOBANU, prose writer, born 1927.

Ion Chobanu's novels *Forests* (1957) and *Bridges* (1966, awarded the state prize of Moldavia) and likewise his short stories published in a separate collection *Meeting with a Hero* are all placed in Moldavian villages. Both of his novels, to a great extent autobiographical, cover the final years of the bourgeois-landlord rule in Bessarabia, the war, and the new, Soviet life established in the post-war years.

Ion Chobanu is familiar with the ways and customs of Moldavian peasants and their psychology. He has an excellent command of the

eloquence of rural language, and his stories are rich in colourful details of the village life.

ION DRUTSE, prose writer, playwright, born 1928.

His very first collections of stories printed from 1953 to 1959 were like a fresh breeze in Moldavian fiction. But it was only the 'sixties and 'seventies that brought him full recognition, with the appearance of such works as the plays *Casa Mare*, and *The Birds of Our Youth*, the novel *The Burden of Our Kindness*, several short story collections and the novel *The Return to His Own Circle* about the closing days of Leo Tolstoy's life.

Drutse's writing is mainly about the modern Moldavian village. He gives philosophic meaning to the profound processes that took place in the outlook and everyday life of Moldavian peasants for the last 50 years, disclosing the ethical basis of their life and psychology. He concentrates his attention not so much on events and actions as on thoughts and experiences. A subtle analysis of emotions, the ironically jesting comments of the author, conditionally symbolical generalisations, fanciful interweaving of fairy-tale motifs with everyday scenes typical of folk tales — these are a few of the means Drutse uses to avoid descriptiveness, lending great emotional and intellectual volume to his narration.

NICOLAE ESINENKU, poet and prose writer, born 1940.

Esinenku had printed at the age of 19. His first collection of verse, *Antennae*, was published in 1968. This was followed by two more books of verse, two collections of short story miniatures and a miniature novel, *In Full Swing*.

Esinenku's work is organically linked with the life of his own village, its natural surroundings, and the thoughts and experiences of people close to him. Specialising in miniatures, he is laconic in the extreme. Psychological time dominates his prose. He confines himself to individual, highly dramatic episodes in the lives of his characters. The confession-like tone of his narrative underscores the lyrical texture of Esinenku's stories.

VLAD IOVITSE, prose writer, playwright and cinema director, born 1935.

His work first appeared in print in 1958, and from 1965 to 1973 he published six collections of short novels and stories. Simultaneously he

scored some considerable success in cinematography, he directed a number of films made from his own screen-plays and became one of the leading directors in Moldova-film, the republic's studio. His latest work, a feature film about Dmitriu Kantemir (1673—1723), a Moldavian ruler, classical writer and outstanding European scholar of his time, has had a resounding success all over the country.

Iovitse's short novels and stories are as a rule based on his own childhood memories and are autobiographical in character. His prose is in the narrative style, in the form of a confiding, emotional talk with the reader.

RAISSA LUNGU, prose writer, born 1928.

Her first collection of stories, published in 1960, at once attracted attention among readers and critics. In the 15 years since then, faithful to the short story genre, she has published 15 books, among them *The Miraculous Medicine* (1963) and *Martsishori* (1968).

Raissa Lungu goes for most of her subjects to the modern Moldavian village which she knows well, but a number of her recent stories have been placed in Kishinev where she now lives. She frequently resorts to the inner monologue, giving individuality to objects and life to the phenomena of nature, thus augmenting the emotional quality of her writing.

ANNA LUPAN, prose writer, playwright, born 1924.

It was in the early 'fifties that Anna Lupan's first articles and stories were printed, taken from the life of Moldavian villages where radical changes were in progress at the time, brought by the new collective-farm system. Her first collection of stories, *The Road to the Village*, came out in 1955 and aroused great interest among readers and critics. Since then she has written several novels, 14 collections of stories, and plays which have been staged with success in Moldavian theatres.

Anna Lupan writes of the things which she has herself seen and which are prompted by a rich experience of life. Like other villagers, she witnessed and participated in the thoroughgoing transformation of the whole life of the Moldavian rural population. And she concentrates her attention on the changes taking place in the spiritual and ethical aspect of village people.

GEORGE MENYUK, poet, prose writer and essayist, born 1918.

Started appearing in print while still a student at Bucharest University at the end of the 'thirties, before Bessarabia was reunited with Soviet Moldavia.

In the past 15 years about forty collections of verse, stories, essays and critical articles and books for children and the youth by George Menyuk have been printed. For his short story collection entitled *The Dolphin* he was awarded the State Prize of Moldavia.

Menyuk's lyrical-philosophical poetry is imbued with an ardent love for his land and those who work on it, filled with thought and care about the future of the various forms of the folk art. Close contact with folklore which he started collecting and studying in his youth protected him from saccharine sweetness or bombast in his verse and led to extensive use of the fairy-tale and ballad genre.

The characters in Menyuk's stories are ordinary people living in the most ordinary surroundings, but he discloses a great world of thought and emotion in each one of them.

SERAFIM SAKA, prose writer, publicist, born 1935.

The first volume of short stories by Saka came out in 1968, followed in 1972 by a volume which included short stories and the novel *The Testing*. The Moldova-film Studio has used his screenplays for a number of documentary and feature shorts.

In his short stories Serafim Saka tries to create a special atmosphere, influencing his characters to deep thought, to self-analysis. Despite the apparent ordinariness of the conditions in which these characters find themselves, they have to decide acute questions of human psychology and ethics. Their relationship to the life about them frequently finds expression in short but significant maxims. This strengthens the publicist tone in Saka's stories, some of which to a significant extent approach the pamphlet genre.

ARIADNA SHALAR, prose writer, born 1923.

Shalar's first book, *Ilya Hews Himself a New Road*, came out in 1949; this was followed by a number of books for young readers. She made her

name with writings in big and small prose about the transformations in the post-war Moldavian villages.

The main characters in Ariadna Shalar's novels and stories are people of complex, original natures, not very gregarious but reacting acutely to everything round them. Encounters with these difficult people bring out traits of other persons. The writer's main attention is concentrated on the psychology and destinies of her characters.

SAMSON SHLYAKHU, prose writer, born 1915.

Shlyakhu was active in the underground revolutionary movement in Rumania of the bourgeoisie and landowners, and served in the Soviet army in the war. His first volume of short stories *The Builders* was published in 1950, when he was thirty-five.

His subjects are to a great degree suggested by his own life — the revolutionary movement against the bourgeois and landowner system, the war, and the development of the working class in the post-war period in the young Soviet republic. For his novel *Comrade Vanya* he was awarded the Komsomol Prize of his republic!

The main characters in Shlyakhu's stories and novels are underground revolutionaries, soldiers in the Soviet army, and working people in Kishinev, the capital of Moldavia. He is interested in the lives of modest, inconspicuous people who never attract attention by any unusual traits — it is in these that he finds the loftiest spiritual values.

ANDREI STRYMBYANU, poet, prose writer, playwright, born 1935.

His path in literature began with a slim volume of verse, *The White Well*, in 1963. It was followed by books of plays and stories.

Andrei Strymbanu's short stories have won him deserved recognition and occupy a special place in modern Moldavian prose. The writer concentrates his attention on the feelings and emotions of his characters and as a rule catches only the most significant moments of their actions, those which help to disclose a person's traits. Strymbanu's stories are marked by subtlety of psychological analysis and a harmonious combination of the comic and dramatic.

VASILE VASILAKE, prose writer, translator, born 1926.

First appeared in print in 1961. Since then he has published eight collections of literary essays and short stories. The Moldova-film Studio has made a number of feature shorts from his screenplays. Vasilake has also translated into Moldavian a number of books including novels by Gashek, Nushich and Olesha.

The most popular of his novels is *Tale of a White Bull* — a kind of philosophical legend of good and evil.

Vasile Vasilake's works have contributed a new word to modern Moldavian prose. He has an excellent mastery of the living speech of the people. His stories disclose new features in the life, customs and psychology of the Moldavian peasants of today.

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